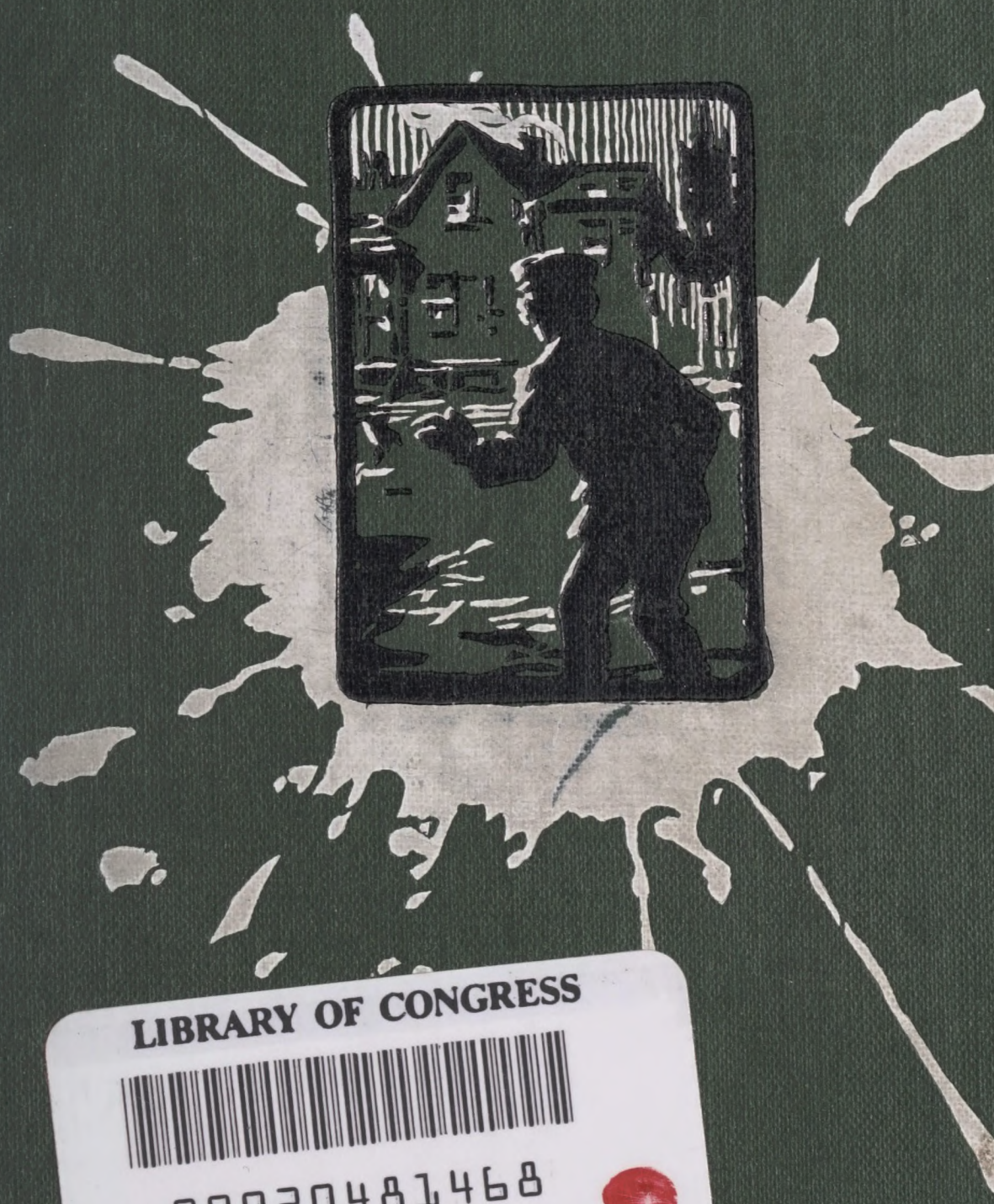
WITTER WHITEHEAD'S OWN STORY



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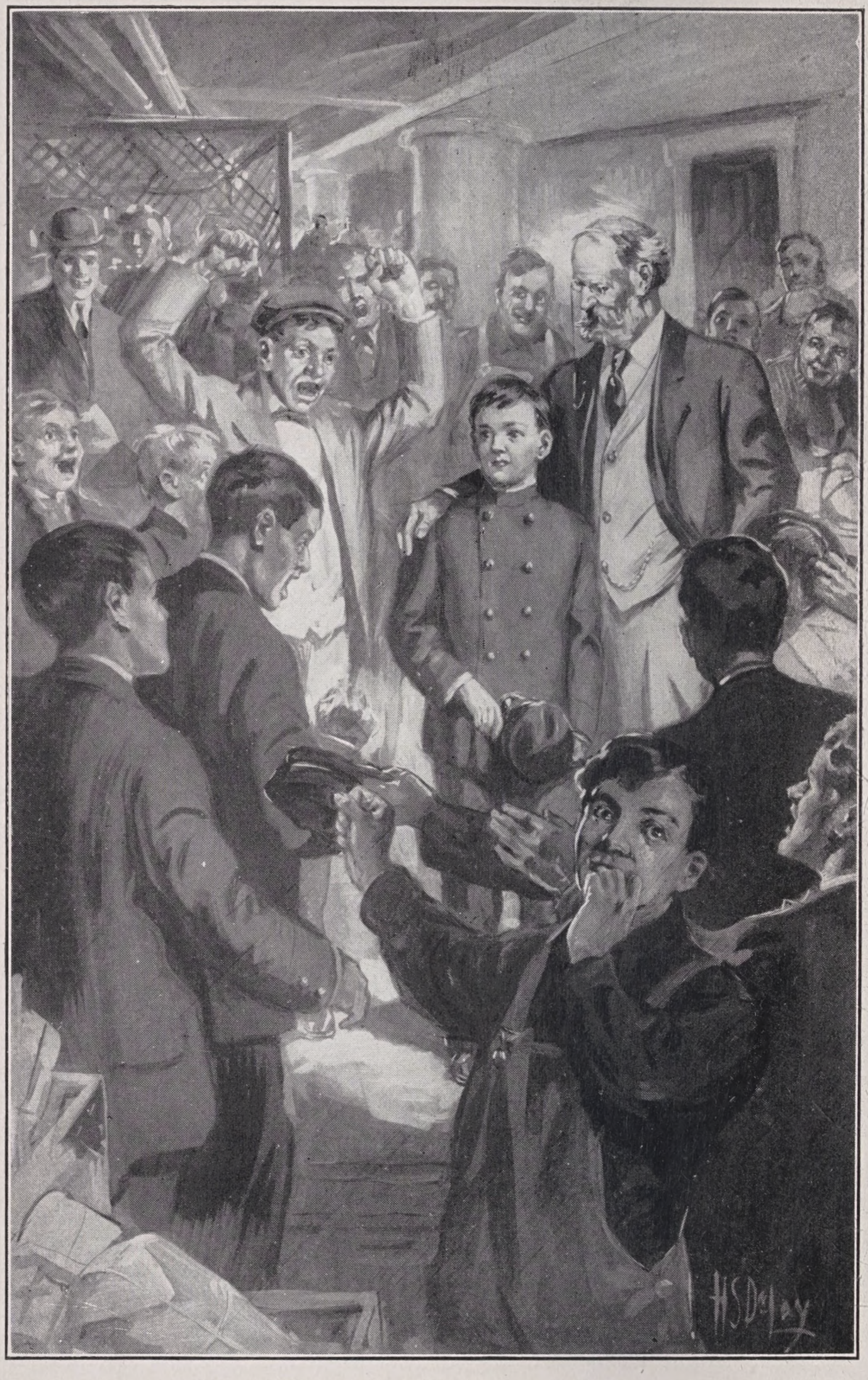

HE SAID HE WAS PROUD AND GLAD THAT "ONE OF HIS BOYS" HAD WON IT.—Page 268.

WITTER WHITEHEAD'S OWN STORY

ABOUT A LUCKY SPLASH OF WHITE-WASH, SOME STOLEN SILVER, AND A HOUSE THAT WASN'T VACANT

BY

HENRY GARDNER HUNTING

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
H. S. DELAY

NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
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TO

E. J. H.

A LOVER OF BOYS

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WITTER WHITEHEAD'S OWN STORY

CHAPTER I

IN DEFENSE OF A FRIEND

I SUPPOSE if it hadn't been for the whitewash-throwing, this story would never have been told. If Midgy—that's what we called Fred Midgley—hadn't plastered the back of my new uniform coat all over with the white, because I wouldn't let him bother little Rick Neufer, I never would have been back of the packing-cases in the shipping-room, cleaning it off; and so I never would have heard the things I did hear, and wouldn't ever have been mixed up in all the trouble about the robberies.

We were all wagon-boys at Fleming's big department store. It's one of the biggest in the city, and there are a good many of us—I should

think as many as sixty or seventy. Every wagon that delivers goods to customers has either two or three boys who ride with it. One drives and the others carry the packages from the wagon to the houses or flats where they are addressed. We all wear a uniform of dark green, with caps that have " Fleming's " in gold letters on the front, so that anyone can tell, wherever they meet us, what store we came from.

The shipping-room is a very big place, in the basement under the store. It is a long room, full of iron pillars, that are whitewashed and that hold up the first floor and the building above. The room always has a lot of boxes in it, packed and empty, and the packers are always working and hammering and sawing there. We always have to report there mornings to Mr. Farley, who is the room-boss, and there's where we have to work when the wagons are in and being loaded. That is, we help load the wagons.

I was a new boy myself then. I'd only been there a little while—about a week, I think. That

was the time father had broken his leg and had to sit in a chair for six weeks, and I had to stop school and help mother make money enough for us all. I just happened to be lucky and got that job. And Rick, he was a new one, that very day that Midgy began to pick on him, and it made me mad, because I knew it wasn't fun being a new boy and, besides, Rick was little.

It was a mean trick of Midgy's to put whitewash on me. I might have known he'd do something like it though, for you don't have to know some boys very long before you know just what they will do. He and I had had a little fuss before about something—I've forgotten what—and he didn't like me anyway. So when he was trying to cut the buttons off Rick's coat, just to get him into trouble with Mr. Farley, and I came in and told him to stop, he was so mad he'd do anything he could to me. When I turned to talk to Rick, he hit me in the back with the whitewash brush which some men had been using in the basement. He ran, though, right away, up the stairs

and out to the wagons at the curb, and when I'd taken off my coat and had seen how he'd smeared it all over with the stuff, I ran after him. But I ran right into Mr. Farley's arms, at the first landing, and he thought we'd been fighting and made me go back and, afterwards, when he saw the whitewash that had been spilled on the floor, he thought I'd done that, too, and blamed me for it.

I didn't tell about Midgy. You can't very well. Every fellow thinks it isn't square to tell, and it isn't, but sometimes it's awfully hard not to, when you're blamed for something the other fellow did. Of course, if the other boy is square, he'll tell himself, when you're blamed, but sometimes he's just glad that you are caught instead of him, and he keeps still and lets you have all the trouble. That's a good deal worse than telling on anybody else.

But Mr. Farley didn't see my coat, for Rick Neufer picked it up and ran around behind the packing-cases with it when he saw Mr. Farley coming. Rick was afraid I'd be discharged, if

the room-boss saw the coat, and I guess I would, because they are very particular about how you keep your uniform and they don't let you explain very much when anything happens.

Well, Rick and I were around behind the cases together. He's a little German, with hair almost white, and curly all over his head. And he always laughs at you when he talks, and his eyes just sort of sparkle so that you can't help laughing, too, and liking him. His name is really Frederick, but he had a funny way of talking, pronouncing words just a little different from our way, and yet trying to be so proper, that it's very funny, the first time you hear him. He said his name was Freder*ick*. Father says that is putting the accent on the last syllable, and it means just saying the last part of the name harder than the rest of it. So that was why we all called him Rick, from the start. Some of the boys started to call him "Whitehead," but that happens to be my real name—Witter Whitehead—so they stopped and called him Rick.

Most people think Witter is a funny name for a boy. It is, I guess, but I was named for a Mr. Witter who was a friend of father's when I was a baby. I remember Rick was talking about it that day behind the boxes, for we really talked quite a long time there, and about lots of things, while I worked cleaning my coat. But right in the middle of when I was telling him about father's breaking his leg and all that, the number of Rick's wagon was called and he had to go, and it was right then that Mr. Farley caught him.

I remember just how it sounded and what they said. I could hear it through the boxes.

"Well, sir, where'd you come from?" That was the first thing I heard after Rick left me, but I knew Mr. Farley's voice and I knew Rick was in trouble in a minute.

Rick didn't say anything, and I could tell right away that he was keeping still because he didn't want me to be seen till I got the coat cleaned up once more.

"What were you doing behind those boxes?" asked Mr. Farley.

"Nothing," Rick said then, and I nearly laughed. It sounded so sort of scared and squeaky. But I was sorry right away, for Mr. Farley was meaner than I thought he could be. He isn't a mean man generally, only sharp and quick.

"Tell me what you were doing back there, or I'll shake you out of your shoes!" Mr. Farley said, and his voice went all hoarse, just like when you have a cold.

It seemed very queer to me that he should make such a fuss about Rick's being back of the boxes. I'd been in there before and so had the other boys, a good many times, I guess. There couldn't be anything wrong about that, I thought, and I commenced to believe that maybe Mr. Farley wasn't so square a man as I'd thought. But Rick's answer was funny, the way he said it.

"I go in there to make a hide," he said.

"To what?" asked Mr. Farley.

"Hide," answered Rick.

"Hide what?"

"Nothing," Rick said again.

"What are you talking about, you little duffer?" Mr. Farley asked. He was angry quick, too, for he thought Rick was making fun or telling lies about it.

"What's that—duffer?" Rick asked, and it sounded so funny to me, just then, that I nearly laughed out loud. Rick was always asking questions like that when he didn't know all the words you said to him, because he wanted to learn and to be just exactly proper. But Mr. Farley didn't know that, of course.

"Don't be smart, now," he said. "Wake up and tell me why you were behind those boxes."

But Rick wouldn't answer then. He told me afterwards that he didn't know what to say that wouldn't let Mr. Farley know about me and the whitewash on my coat. So he just kept still.

"You won't say anything?" asked the room-boss.

And then, as Rick still kept quiet, he suddenly turned, and I heard them going together around toward the end of the long row of boxes, and Mr. Farley said, " Very well, we'll look and see."

It wasn't funny then, for I didn't want to get caught. I grabbed my coat and jumped up on one box, quick as I could, and then I climbed and crawled into a big box there and waited, and in just a minute Mr. Farley came down behind the cases with Rick.

" Well, are you going to tell me, or aren't you?" the boss kept asking. Right under me, almost, they stopped again, and he asked Rick the same question and I heard him shake the little fellow hard, and it made me awfully sorry, for it was to save me Rick was keeping still. But I couldn't see how he could blame Rick, just for coming in back there, and he would be likely to blame him just as much, if he found me, so I thought I'd better keep still.

But Rick wouldn't say a word. He knew I must be in one of the boxes there, of course, and

he said to me that night that he thought Mr. Farley knew he had some secret about the place because he was so suspicious. I was surprised then, because Mr. Farley made such a great deal of it, for it seemed a very small thing anyway, but I could only wait till they went away again before I could move.

Well, they went away after a while. Rick began to cry before long. He's such a little fellow he couldn't help it, and I guess Mr. Farley hurt his arm when he shook him. But just as they went, I found out a very queer thing that made me stay quiet and look and think quite a while. It was light enough back in behind the boxes, and especially in the one I was in, for there was a window straight in front of it that opened out on the side-street pavement. It wasn't a high window, just a low, narrow one, that could be swung up, to open it, and fastened to a hook on the beam above. But it wasn't the window I thought about; it was what I found in the box.

When they had gone out of hearing, I turned

around to get my coat that I had thrown back in the box, and I saw, lying in a corner, a little heap of things, all huddled up, just as if they'd been thrown there, too. And they were a kind of things that I knew couldn't ever have been left in the box by accident, because it was a dry-goods box and the things were watches and rings and some lace and chains and some silver things. They lay there, just half covered with some shavings, as if somebody had put them there in a hurry and only partly hidden them.

I was so surprised I didn't know what to think, at first. Nobody would ever put things there, I thought, if they didn't want to hide them very safe. The box was away in the back of the pile and probably wouldn't be used for a long time, so that was one reason why anyone might hide things in it. But, if they had to hide things like that, it looked, right away, as if the things must have been stolen, and just as soon as I thought of that I got very much excited, for I couldn't help believing it was so.

I looked and looked at them a long time before I even touched them. Somehow I didn't want to have anything to do with them, right from the beginning, for I knew, if they were stolen, the store people might be looking for them right then, and that, if they weren't stolen, I hadn't any business to touch them. And then, all at once, I thought perhaps these things had something to do with Mr. Farley's acting so queer with Rick, insisting and insisting about his telling why he went behind the boxes.

I don't know why I did, finally, pick up some of the things and look at them. Father says now that it was curiosity. He laughed at me when he read what I wrote here first about this, and then told me just to say it was my curiosity. I guess that was it, too, all right. Anyway, I looked at some, and, at last, I looked at all of the things and turned them all over and wondered and wondered what to do. And I was so busy that I'd almost forgotten about thinking of getting away and out, while I had a chance, when

I heard some voices coming again. One of them I didn't know, but the other one was Mr. Farley's once more.

"It was in here," he was saying. "The boy wouldn't tell me what he was here for, and, under the circumstances, I thought I'd better let you know."

"Well," the other man said, "I don't know that your boy knows anything about what we're looking for, but I don't know that he doesn't, either. I'll search this place here, anyway."

I was frightened. Whoever the man was with the boss, I was as sure then, as if they'd said so, that they were looking for the goods or to find out about the robbery, and that was just what they were doing, as I found out afterwards. And the man who talked with Mr. Farley was a detective. I expected they'd commence to search then, too, and I knew they'd find me in a minute, if they did, and, with all those things in the box with me, they would think I must be the thief. The detective commenced to walk along the space next

to the wall and hit the boxes with a cane or something he was carrying and then he came back, taking little jumps and looking in boxes on the second tier.

"Why do you look in the boxes?" Mr. Farley asked.

"Can't tell what we may find," the detective answered.

"What do you expect to find?"

"I expect nothing and everything, in a case like this."

I thought that was a funny answer, but it was what he said.

"You don't think anybody would hide in these boxes, do you?" asked Mr. Farley.

"Possibly."

"It was the windows I thought of. I wanted to make the boy confess if he was guilty. It seems to me that someone must unfasten a window or something from the inside, and I've rather suspected it might be one of the boys."

"Maybe. We'll see about confessions when

the time comes," said the detective. He talked a little as if he didn't give Mr. Farley credit for knowing much or for being very sensible, and I guess it made Mr. Farley angry, for he sort of grunted and stopped talking.

Then they both commenced to look again up and down the row, and I got back in my box as far as I could, hoping and hoping they might not look as far as that, but wondering what I could say, if they found me.

"Well," the detective said, after a minute, "I think I'll go and get a couple of my men and make a thorough search through the basement here. It looks as if these boxes had not been disturbed for some time. It's quite probable there are many possible hiding-places for man or goods down here."

"Yes," said Mr. Farley, "it's quite probably possible."

I guess he meant to make a little fun of the way the detective was careful not to say anything positive. But I was too much frightened by this

idea, that they would come and look the boxes all over, to think much about anything else. I had to get out of there, if I could, before they came back, and I didn't know how I would ever do it, for Mr. Farley would surely watch the only place where anyone could go out of the space behind the cases into the room.

But just then, I looked up at the window and noticed that the catch which ought to hold it down was drawn partly back, and it made me think, all in a second, that I might get out that way, if I was quick. And without waiting, only just long enough for them to get out of sight, I reached over—it was easy—and slipped the bolt over. Next minute I climbed out to the pavement, right on the side street.

Well, I thought somebody outside might notice me, and I was a little afraid, but when I looked up after I'd gotten fairly out, no one seemed even to have looked at me. But just as I was almost ready to run around the corner and so back to the basement door and down again, I heard a funny

little noise right behind me, and looked down to see a man sitting on the pavement with black glasses on his eyes and holding a tin cup, but acting as if he knew as surely as could be that I was there.

I thought I had frightened him. I could see that he was a blind beggar, and you know blind people hear better, almost always, than other people. Of course, he must know he was sitting against a stone wall and he would think it very queer for anyone to come suddenly out of it.

"You needn't be afraid," I said, walking around, away from the window. He turned his head towards me, and held out his hand.

"Where'd you come from?" he asked.

"Out of the window," I said.

"How did you happen to come up that way?" he went on.

"Oh, I was just trying a new way," I said. And then, all at once, it occurred to me that maybe, if he knew it was the store basement I had come out of, he might tell someone about

it and they'd find out who I was and then it would be just as bad as if I'd been caught in the box.

But I didn't know what he meant to do. He was quiet a second, and then he turned his eyes right towards me, as if he could see. I stood still and watched him, for sometimes those beggars aren't blind when they pretend to be. But in a minute, I could see that he was just listening, and then he put out his hand straight in front of him, as if he thought I was there, and whispered to me.

"Help me get up," he said. "I've got rheumatism very bad to-day."

So I reached out and lifted while he got his feet under him, and he stood up. But he didn't let go of my hand. He leaned back against the wall and pulled me close to him and gripped my fingers so tight that it hurt.

"Did you see anybody?" he asked.

"Anybody who?" I asked, because it seemed funny he should speak so.

"Did you see anybody else here?"

"No—only you."

"Not a boy?"

I thought of Rick, but I wasn't going to tell on him, so I just said, "I haven't seen anybody near the window here, but I heard two men talking together."

"Two men?" he said. "Who were they?"

"Mr. Farley, the room-boss, was one."

"What were they doing?"

I didn't know just what to say. If I told him they were searching for a thief or for stolen goods it would be funny if he didn't think maybe he ought to keep hold of me and turn me over to them. He was still holding me tight all the time, and if he hadn't asked so many questions I would have thought that he had that very thing in mind. But I couldn't think of anything else true to tell him, and I wasn't going to lie out of it. Father says a liar is a coward, anyway, and I guess probably that's always about so. If you think about it, you always find out that your

father knows. So I didn't say anything for a minute.

"Were they looking for anything?" the blind man asked.

"Yes," I said.

"What?"

"They didn't tell me."

"Were you with them?"

"No."

"Where were you?"

"I was hid."

"Oh!" He seemed to feel different for a second, and I felt his hand loosen on mine a little, so I suddenly jerked and got away. But I hadn't any more than done it, before he reached out, just like lightning, and caught hold of my coat. It was so quick that I hardly knew he'd done it till I felt his fingers dig themselves into the folds of the coat, just like a cat's claw, when she tries it on your trousers or your stocking, without scratching, but as if she wanted to show you that she can.

HE REACHED OUT, JUST LIKE LIGHTNING, AND CAUGHT HOLD OF MY COAT.

That made me kind of mad, and I jerked hard, and then, when he didn't let go, I got madder and frightened, too.

"You let go of me!" I said, and I struck and pounded at his hand.

"Gently, gently, young man," he said. "Now don't let's quarrel—we're going to be friends."

"Well, you let go of my coat."

"Wait. I want to tell you something. Did the men inside look at this window here?"

That made me stop and think. Perhaps he knew something he could tell me.

"No," I said. "Do you know anything about it? Do you suppose the thieves use it?"

I didn't mean to ask that question, for it made him understand just what I was thinking about. But it popped out, just like the noise does when you laugh in school, before you think. I felt his hand grow tight, all at once, and I was sure he took me for the thief.

"What do *you* know about thieves?" he asked, sharp.

"Nothing," I said; "I was just hiding in the box and found the things there."

"Oh, you found the things. You mean things hidden in the box?"

"Yes, watches and jewelry."

"Of course," he said. Then he stopped and seemed to listen again. "Well," he went on, pretty soon, "I've been watching, too."

"Oh!" I said. "Are you looking for the robbers, too?"

"Yes," he answered, "I am. I've known there was something wrong for quite a while. Are you sure you don't know anything more about it?"

"No, honestly, I don't know a thing," I said. "But are you a detective?"

"No," he said. "They've got detectives in the store, but I'm just keeping watch out here. They don't know me, but I think I know how to get this thief."

He was smiling now. He had a beard that was rather long and not very well washed and combed. When he laughed—it was more like a

laugh than a smile, only he didn't make any noise —he just opened his mouth and his beard dropped down against his coat, and he just sort of held it open a minute quiet, while a lot of wrinkles came around the corners, and then he closed it again quick and short, as if he had been yawning. It was a funny laugh.

But what he said made me wonder again. "*You* can catch the thief?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "before they ever do."

"If you could," I said, "Mr. Fleming would probably give you a reward." Mr. Fleming is the owner of the store, you know, and everybody says he's a very generous man.

"Yes," the blind man said, "I know—that's what I'm working for. But you mustn't tell, now, for you'd spoil my plans. I thought maybe you were the thief, but I can see now you are honest. I wouldn't tell anybody but you. How would you like to help me?"

Well, that made me think differently about him right away. Of course, any boy would like to

help catch a thief who was robbing a store where he worked, because it would be very exciting, and besides, the boss might give you a better place. So I said yes at once, for I couldn't help believing that the blind man might know more than the people inside the store. Blind folks are so quiet and they hear and smell and feel so much better than we do that they learn things people don't dream they know. All at once, it seemed to me maybe the blind man and I could capture or find out about the robber, and so it would make everybody think we had done well. I was awfully anxious to get a good place at the store quickly, too, because father and mother hadn't very much money then and we didn't know just how we could get along till father's leg got well. So then, I told the blind man all about how I happened to be in the box and find the things, and we talked quite a little. But when I asked him if I ought to tell Mr. Farley where the stolen things were, he said no, not then, because if we left them there, maybe the robber

would come after them and we would catch him. If the detective found them, why of course we couldn't help that.

It was quite a long time before I left him. He asked me my name and told me his, which was a queer one.

"You call me Moss," he said, "just Moss."

"*Mister* Moss?" I asked.

"No—just Moss," he answered, and so I did.

Well, when I got back to the shipping-room, I found that Mr. Farley was working around, as if nothing had happened, and the detective had not been back again yet to search. I learned that from a boy named Dib Web, whom I knew a little and who had seen the man the first time he came down to talk to Mr. Farley. Rick had gone out on the wagon and I didn't see him again till I had made another trip, too, and it was almost night. Then I got him away quiet, and told him all I'd found out, because I didn't want him to think I was a sneak, to keep still and let Mr. Farley blame him when he was just trying to

keep me out of trouble. He felt all right about it, but he was all excited about the robbers.

"Don't tell," I said. "We want to catch the thief. You can help, but don't say a word, for if anybody finds it out, it'll spoil it all."

He said he wouldn't tell, but he didn't say he thought of going to look at the stolen things, and that is just what he did, a little later, when I was talking to Dib Web and we were getting ready to go home. Rick slipped away from me and, first thing I knew, I looked up and saw him slide in behind the boxes. I started across the room right away to make him come out, but just then Mr. Farley came downstairs and I saw him look at me sharp and I didn't dare go in. A minute afterwards, three men came downstairs, and Dib whispered to me that the big one, with the yellow mustache, was the detective. They went right straight for the boxes, and just then the closing bell rang, and Mr. Farley ordered us all out of the shipping-room.

I guess I was pretty near crazy all at once. I

knew in a minute that they were sure to catch Rick, and there seemed to be nothing I could do. But all of a sudden, I thought maybe, if I could make them do the wrong thing for a minute, he might get away. So I did the first thing I could think of. I walked down to the back stairs, where it was dark, and then suddenly hollered out, loud as I could, so everybody would hear me.

"Stop, thief! Stop, thief! Help! Help! Mr. Farley! Thief! Help!" and I ran for the stairway that leads up into the alley from the rear, where it is almost dark. And Mr. Farley turned right away and followed me, and then first one and then all the detectives ran, too, and the boys rushed after us, helter-skelter, down the room and up the stairs, and out into the alley where it was getting dark. And then I ran as hard as I could, for I was a little ahead, and I jumped into a corner and found a doorway right behind it, and I went in and found a dark, still passageway there, and so I shut the door and waited.

CHAPTER II

A MEETING IN THE DARK

It was so dark in the passageway that I couldn't see a thing and I hadn't any kind of an idea where I was or what sort of a place it was. It was so still, too, that I could hear the men and the boys out in the alley, running and calling. I found a key on the inside and turned it quick. Some of the boys came so close to my door that I held my breath for fear they would try to come in. I could hear their feet spat on the cobblestones, which were wet, though I don't know where the wet came from. The boys were all calling to each other.

"Did you see him?" "Who was it hollered?" "What did he look like?" "Yes, I saw him," and a lot of things like that. It made me laugh, for I knew, of course, they meant the thief I had yelled about, and there wasn't any such person. It

made me think a little, too, because if I hadn't really told them a lie, I had made them think something that wasn't true, and I didn't know, now, but maybe that wasn't right. So I thought I would ask father about it. But I couldn't let them catch Rick in that place behind the boxes with the stolen things, because I was sure that nothing I could say then would make them believe he wasn't guilty.

But, pretty soon, they stopped running and I heard them begin to come back, and when the men passed where I was they seemed to be mad about it.

"Who was that boy that shouted 'Stop thief'?" one of them asked, just as they were in front of my door, and then I heard Mr. Farley say that he didn't know. That surprised me, for I didn't think about their not knowing who it was. I really hadn't thought about it at all, but I was very glad then, for now they wouldn't ever question me about it. But I didn't have much time to think, for just as I was beginning to feel

easy, I suddenly heard someone right outside the door, and next second the knob rattled and turned and the door cracked and snapped as somebody pressed against it. I could have hollered again just with fright, only I had to keep still.

I pushed myself back in the corner as far as I could and kept perfectly quiet. I knew it was a man outside, because I could hear him make a funny noise, sort of half talking to himself, and yet it didn't seem as if it could be one of the detectives. Then, pretty soon, he kept perfectly quiet, and I couldn't hear anything at all. It seemed as if he must be just listening and listening, and so I breathed as low as I could, till I ached to get a big breath again. Still, there wasn't a sound from him. I wondered if he was standing outside holding the knob and if he knew I was inside there and meant to wait till I had to come out. It made me sort of faint to hold down my breath so, and my heart beat and beat, just as a fellow's does when he's run hard a long ways.

I hadn't run very far and I had had time to get my breath again, so, of course, it was because I thought I was so likely to be caught.

But it seemed very funny that he should be still so long, and I was commencing to wonder about it more than to be afraid, when I heard something else that I hadn't been listening for at all,—a sound of something coming softly down the dark passage behind me. I could hear a scraping sound, like somebody's slippers on the floor, very slow and careful, and then someone breathing hard and uncomfortable.

I've heard people say that your hair is likely to stand up when you are frightened, but mine never did. I felt a shiver run up my back, clear up into my hair, and it seemed to take hold of the skin and draw it tight, and at the same time my heart just stopped beating, or seemed to, though father says it really doesn't at such times, and I was ready to scream right out. I know how a girl feels when she screams over a fright now. She feels just as I did then, not able to

do anything else, afraid and excited, and she can't help it. I came pretty near doing it myself, and so I know. And I'm very sorry for a girl now, when she is frightened that way, and I guess you always do feel sorry for folks instead of laughing at them, when you've been through the same kind of thing yourself.

But I just leaned flat against the wall and waited, because I couldn't run. With the man outside and someone coming inside, there was only one chance for me, and that was to keep still where I was, so I just pressed myself into the corner behind the door. It seemed a terribly long time before the person coming reached the door, and it was horrid to listen to that scraping noise and the hard breathing, but at last I could sort of feel in the air that somebody was close to me, and then was the hardest time of all not to yell and strike out and try to run.

But just then the lock rattled and the key was turned, and in a second the door was opened and the light from some lamp outside shone in

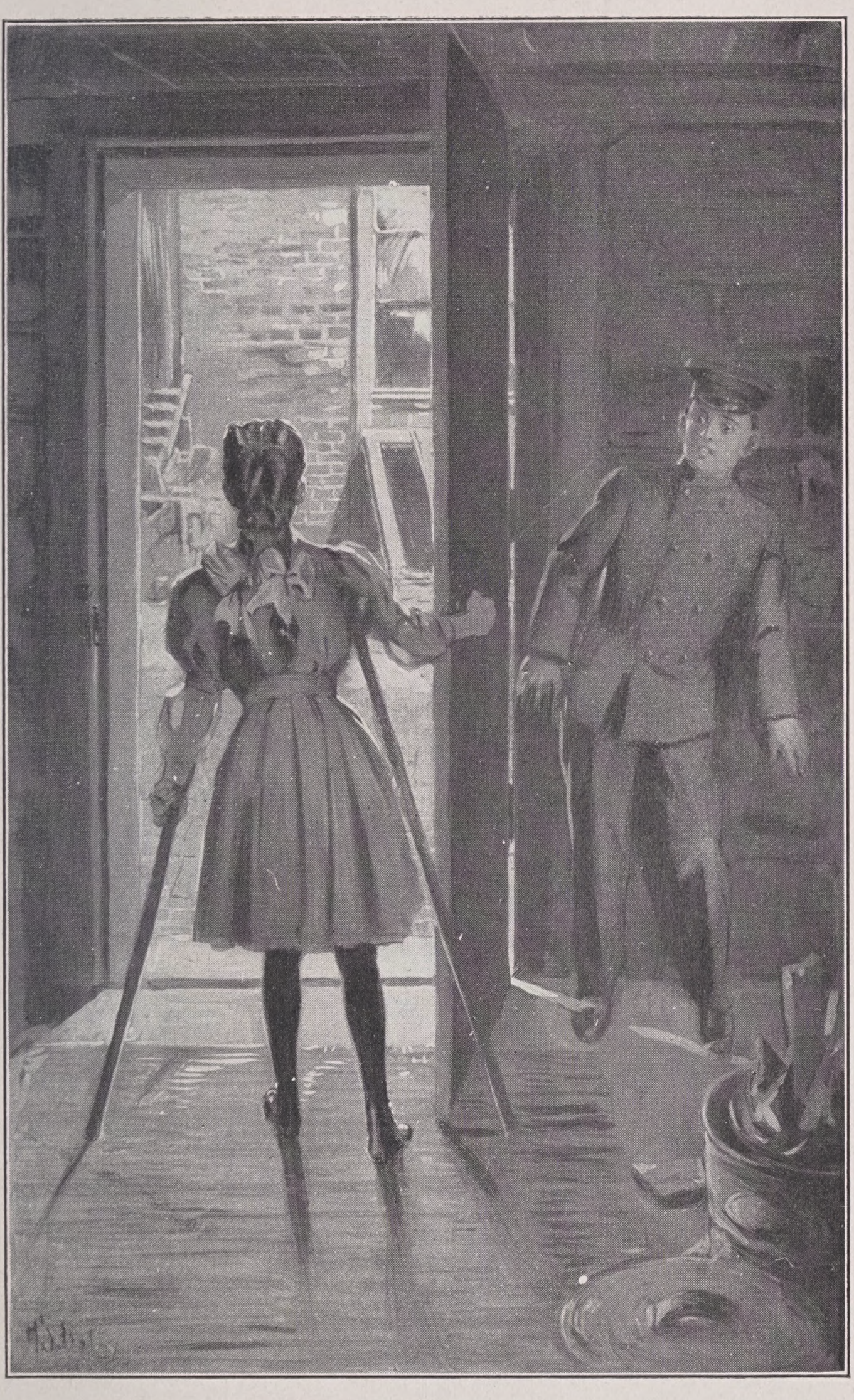
and helped what little was left of the daylight to show me who was at the door. And I was so surprised that I nearly spoke, when I saw just a little girl on crutches inside, and nobody at all in the alley. I couldn't imagine where the man outside had gone, but he must have left without my hearing him.

It was so nearly dark now that the girl couldn't see anything in the hall, and evidently she didn't think of such a thing as that anyone could be there. She looked out and all around in the alley and listened, leaning on her crutches, and I had a chance to see that she was pretty, but pale and sick-looking. She seemed very tired, too, as if just the trouble of coming down the passage on her crutches had tired her almost out. It made me sorry just to look at her, because she looked sort of weak and not very happy.

But pretty soon she turned back, shut the door and locked it again, and then started off slowly up the hallway once more. I got so I could breathe better right away, and I felt like jump-

ing and running, it seemed so good to move again. All I would need to do now was to open the door and run, and nobody would ever know that I had been there at all. I couldn't see anything after the door was closed, but I could hear the little girl's slippers drag on the floor, just as they did before. Then pretty soon the noise stopped all at once, and I couldn't hear a door or anything, so I supposed she was standing still. But after I'd waited and waited to hear her move again, I got so I couldn't stand it any longer and made up my mind to unlock the door softly and then open it quick and run.

That seemed like a good plan, so I stepped forward without a sound, feeling along the door for the knob till I found it, and then I put my other hand down to turn the key. But I didn't seem able to find it. I felt all around, above and below the knob, and tried to remember where it had been. I'd found it easily enough when I first locked the door, but now I couldn't think, and I couldn't feel it either. And then, my



EVIDENTLY SHE DIDN'T THINK OF SUCH A THING AS THAT ANY ONE COULD BE THERE.

fingers suddenly ran right across the keyhole, and I knew the key was gone.

I don't know but I was almost as much frightened then as I had been before, for I was locked in, and I knew that the girl must have taken the key, for I would have heard it, if it had dropped on the floor. Still, I got down on the floor and felt all around, hoping the way you do at such a time, even when you know there's nothing to hope for, but I didn't find it, and then I didn't know what to do at all.

I knew it must be getting late now, and I had to get out and go home. I always went home as early as I could, because mother worries so about me when I'm late. Sometimes, the wagons used to keep me out pretty late, Saturday nights especially, and she used to wait up for me, and I felt sorry, because she had so much to do, sewing and taking care of father, too. I thought about her then and I thought how frightened she'd be if she could know where I was at that minute. For, if the people in the building where I was should

find me, I'd be thought to be a sneak-thief or something, and if they didn't—well, I couldn't see how I was going to get through a locked door and get away.

I thought about it a long time, but, at last, as everything was so still in front, I thought the girl must have gone, and I believed the only thing for me to do would be to go up the passage and find out what sort of place I was in. So I felt along the wall again, carefully as I could. I was mighty scared, for it isn't any fun to be in a place where you don't belong, when you don't know anything about the people who live there, and when they are likely to be angry if they find you. Of course, almost anybody would be mad to find a person prowling around in the house, especially at night, and some people might shoot or call the police before they knew why you were there at all. I thought about that, and about what father and mother would think if I should be arrested.

Every board I stepped on seemed to make a

noise. One would creak and another one crack, just like a nail does sometimes in the house when it's very cold weather. Each time there was a noise like that, I'd start and stop and wait, for I'd be sure somebody'd hear. But the house was just as still as if nobody was in it, and so, after a while, I went on without so much fuss. I didn't think to count my steps to find out how far it was, but I thought it was a very long ways, indeed, for I stepped and stepped out slowly and carefully, feeling my way for fear there might be a downstairs or something. And then, all at once, my hand came against something soft that moved away the second I touched it, and I jumped as if somebody had shot a gun right in my face.

But it wasn't a person, as I thought at first, but just a curtain in a doorway, and the minute I found that out, I knew why I hadn't heard any sound when the girl left the passageway. I pushed the curtain a little bit one side, too, and tried to see beyond it, but, though there was a

little more light in the room I looked into, it was too dim to show me what sort of place it was, and it was just as quiet as the hall. I didn't dare go in, for when I stepped my foot inside, there was carpet on the floor and that showed that it must be part of someone's flat or house.

I drew back pretty quick and felt along as far as I could reach from the doorway, to see whether the passageway went further. It seemed to, but the minute I started to take a step I tripped and fell right forward, and next minute I was on a flight of stairs that led up into the building. There seemed to be nothing to do but go up. It was no use to go back, and I was afraid someone would come out of the door I'd found, almost any minute, for I made a great racket when I tumbled down on the stairs. So I got down and crept up the stairs as fast as I could, on my hands and feet.

Of course, always there is a front stairs and a back stairs in a building like that. It was a business block, mainly, I knew, for it must front

on the street back of Fleming's, which was a great business street, so I believed there must be a way through some upper hall, and I began to hope, pretty quick, that maybe this was my way out. I began to hurry and I was less careful about noise, and then in a minute I saw a light, faint, above, and I began to run up the last steps.

Just then there was a noise downstairs and I heard someone come out in the hall, and then a man shouted out loud and with such a heavy voice that it rang in the hall just like when you holler in a barrel or down a well.

"Who's there?" he said.

I just ran harder. I didn't dare stop then, and the minute he heard me, he started right up after me, calling and shouting:

"Who are you there? What are you doing? Where are you going? Stop!"

Oh, but I was afraid then. I stumbled and jumped and tried to run harder, and my feet seemed to get just as heavy as they seem, some-

times, when you try to run in your dreams. They just dragged. The stairs made a terrible cracking noise under the man's feet and he came fast, as if he knew the way.

But the top was close and I got there, just a second later, and then I could see just across a wide hall the head of some other stairs and a lamp burning dimly above them, and I ran across and jumped down those steps as if they were only doorsteps. In a minute I stepped wrong, too, and first I knew I was falling head first, and then over and over, down and down, till I reached the bottom. But I didn't feel hurt then, and just got up and ran out in the street and through the crowd that was passing—for it was just at the crowded time—and got to the other side of the street.

Well, it seemed to me nothing ever tasted so good as the air did, sharp and cold, and when I looked at the lights my eyes felt just the way they always do when you've been reading a long, long time and have forgotten everything else but

the story, and then you suddenly look up and see everything natural around you and it doesn't look natural at all. I was safe, for though I stopped and looked back then, nobody came out of the stairway after me, at all.

I think I thought about Rick then for the first time since I shut the door in the alley. But I commenced to wonder right away what had become of him and whether he had gotten out of the place behind the boxes before the detectives got back. I looked up at a clock there was on the corner and saw it was nearly six o'clock, so I knew that the store must be closed and that it wouldn't do any good to go back now and try to find out. I was pretty much worried, for if Rick was caught, they might put him in jail, I thought, and he wouldn't have anybody who would know or care. I didn't know anything about his people or where he lived, or I would have gone then to see if he was at home and then I would know, but I had to wait.

I did walk around past Fleming's, thinking I

might see somebody who would know, even then, if Rick had been arrested, but nobody was around the store at all. Even the blind man, for I thought of him after a while, was gone from the place he had been sitting in, so there was nothing for me to do but to go home.

But I thought about Rick. What if he had been caught? I had had a pretty exciting time and I was tired, too, but I thought more about Rick than anything else. It seemed pretty mean if a boy had to be believed guilty of things he didn't do, just because he happened to be where the thing was done, or because circumstances happened to look as if he did it. Father calls that circumstantial evidence, and he says sometimes men are sent to prison on that kind, and it has happened, even when they were innocent, father says.

I got on the train to go home—I have to ride on the elevated road, for we live a long ways from Fleming's store. And all the way home, I thought and thought about what I would do in

the morning if I found Rick had been caught. I knew he would never say a word about me, because he hadn't told about me that day when it would have helped him if he had. Of course, if he was caught, I would have to do something, for I had really got him into trouble. Really, too, he never would have been in the trouble at all if it hadn't been for his trying to help me by hiding my coat from Mr. Farley, and so I made up my mind that, if they had found him back of the boxes, I would go straight to Mr. Farley and tell him all about it.

But you never can tell how things are going to come out. Sometimes it seems as if it was hardly any use to plan, for things very often happen different from what you think they will, and that was so with me that time.

Well, mother was keeping some supper for me, and I saw, right away, that she was very tired. Father was having a great deal of pain in his broken leg, too, and so I thought I wouldn't tell them all about the things that had happened,

because it might make them worry about me. Mother didn't like it very well to have me work as a wagon-boy, anyway. She was always afraid I'd get hurt. So I went to bed pretty soon and kept all the things secret from them. I guess I'd have been pretty glad later if I'd told father about them.

And next day at the store I found out just the very thing had happened that I was afraid of. They *had* caught Rick. He hadn't taken the chance I gave him to get away from the boxes, and the detectives had found him right in the box where I'd hidden, with the stolen things beside him, and, of course, they tried to make him tell all about them then. The worst of it was, they had kept him all night at the police-station, and it wasn't till almost midnight that they let his mother know where he was. And he was still under arrest.

Dib Web knew all about it. He said he saw Rick caught, and that Rick wouldn't answer hardly any questions and seemed to be afraid, and

Dib told me they were going to take him up to Mr. Fleming's office that morning and make him tell everything.

"But where's Rick now?" I asked Dib.

"Over to the police station."

"What—all this time?"

"Of course. You don't think they'd let him go, do you?"

That frightened me worst of all. It seems to me I hadn't understood till just then how bad it was. But I went right to Mr. Farley as soon as he came down from upstairs.

"Mr. Farley," I said, "they arrested Rick Neufer last night, didn't they?"

"How'd you know?" he asked me, and just at first that made me think he knew I was the one who had hollered "Stop, thief!" But in a minute I understood. "Do all the youngsters know?" he asked, looking anxious.

"I guess so," I answered. "One of the boys told me."

"He did, eh? Well, I'll have to tell them all

to keep still about it, and don't you talk about it."

"I want to talk to *you* about it," I said.

He just stopped and looked at me, surprised.

"Rick hasn't got anything to do with it," I said.

"With what?" he asked, so sharply that it made me afraid to say too much.

"Well, he's honest and square, I know," I answered.

"You do, eh? Well, maybe you do. I hope it's so."

"It is."

"Well, I don't know anything about it."

"Are they going to make Rick go to jail?"

"Who told you that?"

"Dib—a boy." I said it like that, for I nearly told Dib's name, and then changed quick because I didn't want to tell.

Mr. Farley looked at me, and then, suddenly, he just laughed, as if he understood exactly what I had tried to do. But it made me like him,

and I began to feel less afraid about Rick, too, for a minute. But in a second he turned sober again.

"I'm sorry, though. Your little white-headed friend is in pretty serious trouble."

That meant Rick, and the way he said it just made me sick.

"Will Mr. Fleming see him?"

"Like enough."

"When?"

"I think he told them to bring the boy here at twelve o'clock."

I didn't know just what to do for a minute, and then I made up my mind. There was no use in telling Mr. Farley and trying to make him believe it, when, if he did believe, I'd have to tell Mr. Fleming or the detectives all over again afterwards, so I thought quickly about it, and I got an idea.

"Could I see Mr. Fleming?" I asked.

"What for?"

"I want to tell him about Rick."

It scared me to say it, for everybody around the store seems to be afraid of Mr. Fleming, but Mr. Farley laughed.

"I guess not," he said. "He won't have time to talk to all the boys in the place."

He was kind enough about it, but he turned away to talk to somebody who came up just then, and I was sort of uncertain what to do. So I went back to help load our wagon and think about it.

I hadn't seen Midgy, as we called him,—the boy that hit me with the whitewash brush,—since the time he had done it, and so many other things had happened that I had almost forgotten about it. But I met him almost as soon as I'd left Mr. Farley, and he made a face and laughed at me. I was pretty mad at him, but I didn't see why he wanted to keep on making me madder. I hadn't really done anything to him, but father says that when you've done something mean to a fellow and don't square it up, it makes you hate him after a while, worse than if he had

done something to you. I guess that was what was the matter with Midgy towards me.

But he was afraid to stand and wait for me, and he kept out of my way. I didn't want to fuss with him then, at all. I was too sorry about Rick, so I didn't pay any attention to him. I told Dib what Mr. Farley said, but I didn't tell him what I thought I'd do. I wasn't sure, and I worried a good deal about when I ought to try to see Mr. Fleming, and at last I had to go out on the wagon before I'd decided, and then I knew I couldn't get back till noon.

But when noon came, I was back and I meant to go ahead right away before Rick got any deeper in trouble, and so I watched my chance to get into an elevator and go up to the third floor, where the general offices are and where Mr. Fleming has his office. I tell you, it seemed a hard thing to do—ever so much harder than it would have been to tell Mr. Farley. Nobody stopped me, though it seems funny now that they didn't, for it's pretty hard to get to Mr. Fleming's

office without somebody asking what you want. I think it was because so many people were getting ready to go to lunch just then and they didn't notice me.

I think I was almost as much frightened when I got to his big glass door and saw—

PRIVATE—MR. FLEMING

on it, as I was when I stood in the dark passage-way and heard the little girl coming, but I knocked before I had time to back out. Nobody answered my first knock and I had to knock again, but I heard voices inside and I thought maybe I would be too late if I didn't hurry. And then, when nobody answered my second knock, all at once I heard Rick talking and crying inside, and I just got desperate and opened the door and walked in.

Well, the door is away over in the corner of the room and the men were so busy inside that

they didn't notice me at all, and I had time to stop and listen, and what I heard surprised me and made me madder than I've ever been before, I guess. They had Rick in the middle of three or four of them and they were asking questions. There were the three detectives I had seen before, a policeman, a man who was a lawyer, as I found out afterwards, and Mr. Fleming, who sat watching them all, very quiet. Rick was crying, as I said, and just as I came in, it was his voice I heard, and his funny way of saying things sounded so, then, that I felt awfully bad for the poor little fellow.

"It is not that I steal," was what he said, sobbing out loud and rubbing his eyes with his hands.

"You don't steal, don't you?" asked the detective in a loud voice. "What were you doing in that box?"

"I went for one look."

"A look, eh? And you didn't know those things were stolen, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, I did know that the things, they were stolen."

"You did! You confess that, do you?"

"What's—what's that—confess?" asked Rick, sobbing, but saying it in his funny way.

"Don't be impertinent," said the detective angrily.

"I don't think the boy meant to be, Howard," said the lawyer. "He seems to find it hard to understand."

"He understands all right," said Howard. "He's making up stupid." Then he just went for Rick hard.

"Who stole those things?"

"I don't know who did steal them," said Rick, more quiet.

"Well, you knew they were stolen, you knew where they were, you knew they belonged to the store, yet you say you don't know who stole them. Now come, tell the truth."

"It is that I do tell the truth."

"Nonsense!"

"No, sir. I went just to take the look at the stolen things. We were to then try to the thief capture."

"We! Who is *we?*"

"I and a boy."

"*What* boy?"

Rick didn't answer.

"*What* boy, I asked you?" The detective just roared it.

"A boy," Rick said, and commenced to cry again.

That made me so mad I wanted to throw something at that detective, but I knew it wouldn't do Rick any good if I did, so I waited, for I didn't know how I was going to get to talk to Mr. Fleming and I thought it wasn't any use to talk to the detective.

"Stop sniveling and answer me straight, or I'll put you in jail for a week," the detective said.

I thought that would make Rick tell, or make him cry awfully, but, all of a sudden, he stopped

and he put his head up, and burst right out with loud words, as if he hadn't been frightened at all.

"You will in the jail lock me? Very well, you do so. We do *not* steal, we only find the stolen things, and I never tell you who that boy is, if you kill me."

It surprised everybody else as much as it did me. The detective's eyes opened wide, the lawyer leaned forward quickly, and Mr. Fleming sat perfectly still and looked at Rick first a long sharp look, and then smiled a little and nodded. But the detective didn't stop questioning.

"Now, look here," he said, "if you've got any secrets you'd better tell 'em. It's too late for you to try any bluffs. Why didn't you tell Mr. Farley as soon as you found those goods?"

But I couldn't stand it any longer for Rick to have it all against him, so I started right into the middle among them all and went straight toward Mr. Fleming, and I said:

"Rick Neufer is telling just the truth, and that man isn't fair. He's scaring him."

But almost before I had said the words, somebody caught hold of my collar behind and jerked me back, and the man they called Howard took hold of me and shook me.

"See here," he said, "what are *you* doing here? Where did *you* come from? Who are you?"

I guess I was just boiling over mad then, and I just yelled it out at him when I answered.

"I'm the other boy!" I said.

CHAPTER III

RUNAWAY HORSES

I GUESS I must have made a great deal of noise when I hollered right out so in Mr. Fleming's office, for three or four of the men said "Sh!" meaning to keep quiet. But the lawyer laughed out loud. I didn't see what he was laughing at, and I looked at Mr. Fleming, and then I didn't look at anybody else for a minute, for Mr. Fleming's eyes, which are gray and keen, but which, I know now, are always kind, were fixed straight on mine and just held them so it seemed I couldn't turn away if I wanted to. And when Mr. Howard commenced to ask questions of me, I didn't pay any attention to him, but just looked at Mr. Fleming all the time and talked to him.

"What do you want here?" asked the detective.

"I came to see Mr. Fleming," I said. I just

glanced at Rick and saw that he was standing with wide-open eyes and mouth and looking at me. Then I nodded at him and looked back at Mr. Fleming. "I want to tell you," I went on, "that Rick isn't a thief and he didn't find the stolen goods first."

"How do you know?" asked Mr. Howard. "You may tell me."

"I know because I told him they were there."

"You told him?"

"Yes."

"When did you first see them?"

"Yesterday morning."

"Who showed them to you?"

"Nobody—I found them."

"Oh, you found them, did you? Then you went and told your young friend here, and he's the only one you told. What kind of a boy are you?"

"Mr. Fleming," I said, not paying any attention to the detective, "I was hiding behind the boxes yesterday and somebody came looking for

me, and I climbed up and got into the one where the things were. I never knew before that they were there and Rick never knew till I told him. When I told him, he went to look, just before the detectives went in to search there last night. I tried to keep him from getting caught, but I couldn't."

"Oho!" exclaimed the detective, "you're the youngster that called 'Stop, thief' last night, are you?"

"Yes," I said.

Mr. Fleming hadn't heard the story about that, so they told him, only they made it worse than it really was. But the lawyer laughed again, and then Mr. Fleming did, too, a little and said that the joke seemed to be on them, and he didn't seem to blame me.

"Where did you go after you ran out?" asked the lawyer, taking the questioning away from Mr. Howard.

"Into a house across the alley, and then through and over into the other street."

"And they caught your little friend here while you were gone?"

"Yes, sir. Rick didn't understand, I guess."

"Well," said Mr. Howard, "it looks to me rather like conspiracy here, Mr. Fleming. I believe this boy is guilty." He pointed at Rick.

Mr. Fleming smiled. "No," he said, "I think you are mistaken, Howard."

The detective sort of threw up his hands, as if he didn't like it, and I thought he felt bad because it wasn't either of us that had robbed the store. And right then, the lawyer saw him, too, and he said, sort of severe:

"What's the matter, Howard? Can't you fasten this on *anybody?*" It sounded just as if he meant to ask if Mr. Howard was trying just to prove somebody guilty without caring whether he really was guilty or not.

But Mr. Howard didn't understand, and he answered angry. "I've had it just about proved here," he said. "I could get a confession out of these youngsters, if I had half a chance."

Then Mr. Fleming spoke quickly: "Yes," he said, "I guess you could. I don't like your methods." Then he looked at the man who held me. "Let these boys go," he said. "We'll have to look further than this."

I wanted to thank him, right then, but I was afraid to say any more, so I took hold of Rick's arm and we went right out. And just as I turned to shut the door, I saw Mr. Fleming still looking at us.

"He's square, isn't he, Rick?" I said, and Rick said yes, he thought so. Then we talked a minute, and I thought Rick ought to go first and find his mother and let her know before he went back to work; so we went down, and, as it was the noon hour, I went out of the store with him and saw him start. He didn't live very far away. Then I turned around to go back and get my lunch when I happened to think about the blind man, and so I hurried around and found him right where he'd been before.

"Did you know they thought they'd caught

the thief this morning?" I asked him, when he knew who I was. He seemed to find it hard to remember me.

He sort of started in a funny way when I said that and asked me a question quick.

"Who is it?"

"Who is what?" I said.

"Who did they arrest?"

"Oh! Rick Neufer."

"Who is he?" He seemed not to care so much, now.

"He's one of the boys—a friend of mine," I answered.

"Oh! Well, he has been arrested?"

"He was, yes. He isn't now."

"Isn't what?"

"Arrested. Mr. Fleming let him go."

"Oh, he did, eh? Well, he wasn't the thief, I know that."

"So do I," I said. "But how do you know? Have you found him?"

"No, but I'm going to, and you can help. You

come and see me here to-night, and don't tell anybody at all."

"All right," I said.

I had to hurry with my lunch that day because it was late and the wagon was just about ready to go out again. But when I had finished and went out, a surprise was waiting for me, and a mighty unpleasant one, too. The driver of my wagon, who was a mighty nice fellow, and who was good to me, though I hadn't known him long, had been taken sick and another fellow named Prall, who Dib Web and some others told me was one of the meanest of all the drivers, had taken his place for the day. And worst of all, they had put another boy on the wagon with me, and that boy was Midgy. And I found out quick enough that the two were friends and were mighty thick, too.

Well, I felt pretty sorry, but I couldn't help it. Of course, if I'd known how bad it would be, I wouldn't have gone at all, or I would have told Mr. Farley then, but I didn't know, and I

thought maybe Prall wouldn't be so bad as the fellows told me he was, so I went right along without saying a word.

We hadn't much more than driven away from the store, before they commenced to plague me, though. Prall sat in the middle of the seat—or rather between Midgy and me, for you couldn't say it was in the middle. The first thing they began to do to me was to crowd me, and I knew before we'd gone far that I would have a hard time of it. They only gave me about six or seven inches of the seat to sit on, and as soon as we were out of sight of Fleming's they pushed slowly and gradually my way, a little at a time. They did it, grinning and laughing and nudging each other, as if they thought I couldn't understand them. The first time I got out of the wagon to deliver a package, they crowded over so far that there was scarcely room at all, and they wouldn't move back when I came to get in again, but made me stand up.

I tried to laugh about it at first, and just

pushed them as if I thought it was fun, too. But you can't do much laughing when you know two fellows are trying their best to be mean to you, so it wasn't long till I was pretty serious. The second time I was out of the wagon, they drove away down the street nearly two blocks before they let me catch up with them again. Then, pretty soon, instead of taking turns with me and delivering half the packages, Midgy began to say it was my turn, sometimes, when it was his. And just a little after that, he said it was my turn every time, and Prall stuck up for him. They told me, if I didn't deliver the packages, they'd report me to Mr. Farley.

Well, I'd stood all I was going to by that time, so I thought what I'd do when I was away from the wagon on one trip, and I just simply made up my mind I was going to get even. So when I went back, I started to climb up into the wagon.

"Get down and work," said Prall, laughing right in my face now.

"I've done my share," I said. "I'll ride a while now."

"Oh, no, you won't," he said, and he and Midgy both commenced to push and laugh harder. But the horses were a little bit skittish and pretty soon they started up quick, frightened by the scuffle, and Prall had to use both hands to hold them. Still they kept me down.

"Next package across the street," said Midgy, and tossed one at me.

The street was muddy and I couldn't let the package drop, so I caught it, and then I thought I'd better deliver one more while I thought again. I could see that they were just waiting for me, and so I surprised them. I had the receipt-book which customers sign when we deliver a package that happens to have money with it, like change going back on a mail-order or an exchange. I suddenly thought I could use that book.

"Your turn," yelled Midgy, laughing so he could hardly talk, and getting a big bundle ready to push towards me.

"Your turn," said Prall, too.

"No," I said. "I don't have any more turns this trip. If Midgy doesn't deliver the rest, you will, or they won't get delivered."

"Oh, is that so?" Prall said. "Well, you don't ride, see?"

"Yes, I do," I said, and I held up the book. "If you don't move over and give me a place, I'll go back to the store with this receipt-book, and if you want to come in and see Mr. Farley about it, you can."

They are awfully particular about the receipt-book at the store and about every record in it. There were quite a number of packages still to deliver that would have to be receipted for in it, and I was sure they wouldn't dare let me do what I said. I didn't know but Prall might try to hit me or something, but I climbed right up over the wheel so quickly that I startled the horses. They jumped and Prall had to hold the lines tight. But I was not a bit afraid of him, though he's a good deal bigger than I am, and,

first I knew, he and Midgy both slid along and let me on the seat.

They were mighty quiet about it, and so was I. Everybody was mad, of course, but I knew they didn't want to do anything more to me just then. Midgy knew, too, that the packages had to be delivered or I wouldn't be the only one to get into trouble, so, as I wouldn't budge again, he had to carry the rest.

But it didn't really do me so very much good, for Midgy kept getting madder and madder, the more he worked, and I knew I'd made a worse enemy of him than ever, and probably just as bad a one of Prall. I couldn't help it, and father says now, since he's read this that I'm writing, that any man who really *is* a man must have some enemies, for some people will try to run over you and you can't afford to let them, and then they are mad because you won't.

As soon as they found they couldn't make me do all the work, though, they hurried the horses and made the deliveries themselves, but they

wouldn't talk to me at all. They just spoke to each other, sometimes whispering, and, toward the last of the trip, I couldn't hear much that they were saying. I guess they didn't intend that I should, either, for they were planning something. But Prall made the horses go so fast that they got all excited and hot, and I thought maybe we'd have trouble at the barns when we drove in, for the hostlers report wagon-crews when the horses are overdriven.

But it was when we started on the drive back down town that the worst of the whole trouble commenced. Those two seemed to be getting reckless then. They whipped the horses, each of them hitting them, one with the whip and the other with the lines, until they got them to running hard. I was afraid, all right, but I thought they were just doing it to scare me, so I wouldn't say a word. I had to hang on, for the wagon turned corners short, and tipped and bumped and jolted enough to throw a fellow out, if he wasn't mighty careful. Some of the pavements

were wet, and the mud flew up hard and fast. I got wet and muddy pretty quick, but I hung on and kept still. Once, we cut the curb so close that the front wheel on Midgy's side struck the stone hard and I thought it sounded as if a spoke cracked or something, but Prall kept right on. They were both laughing again now and it seemed to me that they had sort of lost their senses. They acted wild.

I thought sure they would stop when they turned into one of the big avenues not far from the store, and perhaps they would have, but just then, when the horses were all stirred up, we passed a big, high wagon and I saw a band in it, and at that very minute they commenced suddenly to play, and our team shied like a pair of colts. They dodged way over toward Midgy's side of the street, and Prall tried very hard to hold them, but he couldn't, and almost before you could think, the wagon struck the curb again, the same wheel that hit before now getting the worst of the shock. There was an awful split-

ting, splintering sound, and then that side of the wagon sagged first and then just sank down, as the front wheel dished and the axle went to the pavement.

Midgy yelled like everything and grabbed hold of Prall, and Prall couldn't do a thing with the lines, and it was not more than a wink of your eye before the end of the axle hit a manhole cover in the pavement and gave the wagon an awful jerk, and out those two fell, head first, to the pavement, Prall carrying the lines with him, and letting go when he struck.

I remember just how they looked in that last second I saw them before the wagon swept away and left them. They were hugging each other and sliding on the wet asphalt, as if it was ice. Then the horses, which had been half-crazy before, but which were wild now, just seemed to double their speed. I know the one on my side seemed to stretch right out in the harness and run as I never saw a horse run before, and before I had caught one good breath, I knew I was alone

in a broken wagon that was being run away with and that in less than a minute we'd cross the most crowded street in the city.

The wheel on my side of the wagon was all right and held up, but the canopy top had cracked or buckled or something and pressed right down against my head, so that I couldn't sit up straight. I hadn't any lines to hold the horses and no way to get hold of them. It seemed only a matter of a minute or two before we would hit another wagon or a car or an automobile and smash all up, and then I'd be killed, sure. But I didn't seem as much frightened then as I am now when I remember it. I just thought "You've got to do *some*thing, Witter," over and over to myself, two or three times, quick.

And then, I saw the lines dragging along the pavement and followed them with my eyes, up till I saw one was caught across a buckle just above the crupper on the back of the horse on that side, and it looked so easy to reach that I hardly thought about the danger, and before I knew it

I was leaning out over the tilted dashboard to get it. And I got it, too, and then it was simple to get the lines back into the wagon and pull up on them.

But it was too late. I hadn't any more than begun to pull before we reached the big avenue, and just at that minute a car came right across our way. There wasn't any chance to pass or turn out, but, just before we struck the horses swerved, and then the wagon crashed into the side of the car, and all the air around me seemed full of flying glass and I felt myself thrown forward, right out upon the wet, sweating back of one of the horses, and when he jumped again, I slid off one side and dropped down on the pavement almost as easy as if the horse had been standing still.

It was an awful mix-up and the horses fell down and kicked and struggled terribly, but after a while the policeman who came got them up and quieted them. It was pretty hard for me not to cry. I don't know why, for I wasn't hurt a

bit, but I simply couldn't keep tears out of my eyes while I watched the work. Even the glass that was in my clothes and in my hair hadn't hurt me, and folks came all around and said I was lucky and that it was remarkable. I was afraid they would think I was a coward if I cried, and I was thinking mostly about that when one of the policemen came out of the crowd and over to me where I was standing now on the curb and stopped beside me.

"Where'd they begin to run from?" he asked me, sort of gruff.

"Away up the street," I answered, and I could hardly get the words out.

"What started 'em?" he asked.

"I—I don't know."

"Why don't you know?" he asked, in just the same tone. "You must have been running your horses."

That astonished me so I hardly knew what to say. I never dreamed anyone would think I was to blame.

"Well?" he said sharply, when I didn't answer, and people commenced to crowd around us.

"I didn't!" I said.

"I guess you did, though," I heard somebody say on the outside of the crowd. "I saw you coming and you was beating their heads off."

The policeman didn't look around, but kept his eyes right on me. "You started to run 'em and they were too many for you, eh? What business has a kid like you driving, anyway?"

Just then, somebody came from the other crowd and walked very fast toward us, and I could see it was a little man with a very red face and that he looked very angry indeed. He almost ran up to the officer beside me, and talked so fast I could scarcely understand him at first.

"Where's the man who drove that team? Where is he? Where is he?" he asked, all in one breath. "I want to find him. I'll horsewhip him. I'll have him arrested. It's a shame, a wicked shame, to have horses treated so."

It seemed almost funny to hear him, even

though he did mean me, and I was a little afraid he would do something to me as soon as he found out I had been in the wagon, but he went right on.

"What became of the driver, officer? He was running those horses, I know he was. There are marks of the whip all over them. They've been beaten—they've been mistreated. They were driven to run away. I think one of them may die, he's so overdriven."

The more he said, the more serious it seemed, and then, when the officer pointed to me, I thought I would be whipped right there.

"There's the kid that's responsible," the policeman said. "He was running 'em, so they say."

The little man ran right at me and caught hold of my shoulders and shook me. "You?" he said. "You did it, did you? You ran those horses like that? You ought to be trounced, young man. I've a notion to cane you."

Well, I was all puzzled and mixed up, for I couldn't see why they thought I had done it, and I didn't know why this little man was so angry

about the horses, for they seemed to be standing up over by the car all right, and though they were panting some, I thought they didn't look so bad as he said. Their coats did show the whip-marks though, where Midgy had hit them.

I tried to explain that I hadn't been driving and that the driver had fallen out, but the crowd made too much noise and the policeman and the little man talked together and paid no attention to me. I would have run away, only I thought that would be like a coward, and besides, maybe the crowd would help hold me if I tried it. I was just thinking that if Midgy and Prall were there, I'd make them tell the truth, when I saw Prall coming up to us.

He was all plastered with the black mud off the pavement and the side of his face was skinned, and he had lost his cap, but he seemed very much more frightened really than hurt. When he saw us, he sort of stopped uncertain, but then somebody in the crowd called out, loud so everyone heard:

"There! There's somebody that's been run over, too. Here's the fellow that was licking the team, young man."

Prall turned quick and I could see his face change in a second. He saw I was being blamed and it was a chance for him, so he just took it right up quick.

"Yes, that's him," he hollered. "He beat the team and I couldn't hold 'em. We broke a wheel and threw me out."

I was wild when I heard that. I just grabbed the policeman's arm, and made him listen.

"I didn't, *I didn't—I didn't!*" I shouted. "He and the other boy whipped the team. I didn't touch them."

"Oh, hear him lie!" Prall answered. "It was him made all the trouble. He tried to grab the lines away from me and turned us into the curb and smashed the wheel."

He came right over towards me, as he talked, and he seemed to be so mad that he wasn't satisfied with getting me into trouble about the

team. And, all at once, he started to run at me, as if he meant to hit me.

"And I'll punch your head, too, for doing it," he said.

But he ran right against the policeman's arm, for the officer stretched it out in front of him, and Prall stopped with a grunt, just as if he had run against a fence.

"Here now, none of that," the policeman said. "Maybe you're just as much to blame as he is. It's no cinch that he beat them horses yet."

Well, that made me look at the officer very much differently. I thought he was unfair and that I hadn't any chance with him before, but he seemed to think that, because some people said I had done the whipping of the horses, that didn't need to make it so. So I just stopped talking and waited, for I began to feel a good deal safer. Prall insisted and insisted, and tried to make the officer believe him, but it didn't do him any good.

"No," the policeman said, "you just wait. We'll see."

But just then Midgy came up all dirt-covered, just as Prall was, and as quick as Prall saw him he asked him if I hadn't been the one to whip the horses, and Midgy said yes, right without hesitating. Of course, that showed me the kind of fellows they were, once for all. A boy may sometimes be ugly and do things that hurt you, and still be a decent fellow when you get to know him, but when he lies about you like Prall and Midgy did, he is a sneak and you can't expect anything but sneaky things of him.

The policeman looked at me kind of funny then, and the little man who had been so mad began to talk again.

"I insist that you arrest him," he said. "I insist; I demand it. I demand it."

"Don't get excited," said the copper. "There's time enough."

"But he's the one at fault. Here are three witnesses. What more do you want? What *more* do you want?"

He had a queer way of repeating a question,

usually the last one he asked, and emphasizing some one word in it. It sounded very funny, and he talked so fast it made me think of a bumble-bee buzzing and buzzing against a glass, for he didn't manage to get anybody to do anything with all the noise he made.

"In good time—all in good time," the officer said.

Then Midgy and Prall started to move away, sort of disgusted and talking between them, but the policeman spoke quick.

"Here, you two, I want you. You stay here."

"What, *me?*" asked Prall quickly, turning.

"Yes, *you,*" said the policeman. "We'll find out all about this."

"I got to go and report," Prall said, and his face showed so plainly he was anxious that I knew the copper saw it, too, for he began to look pretty closely at both of them.

"Never mind, now," he said. "We'll all report pretty quick, over to the station or to your boss."

Midgy looked scared then. "Say," he said, "we ain't done anything. Why do you pinch us?"

Pinch is the word Midgy used to say for arrest. I never heard anybody say it till I went to work at the store, but the policeman understood.

"You ain't pinched, but if you don't stay here and give account of yourself, you will be."

We all seemed to be in it together, and I was pretty sorry, for I thought probably we might all be punished together. And just as I was thinking about it, the crowd over by the car opened and two men led the horses off and two other policemen came over to where we were. I wondered why the crowd had stayed so long by the car, but I couldn't see much over there. Then our policeman spoke to the two other officers about us.

"Here's the three that were in the wagon," he said. "We'll take 'em over to the station till we hear the rights of this."

And then they made us walk ahead of them, all three of us together, and started us away down the cross street, while a whole lot of people followed along, and some boys who had come up commenced to hoot and jolly us about being arrested. I was so ashamed that I couldn't look up, and I thought that it would be terrible if I should happen to meet anybody who knew my father and mother. But Prall and Midgy commenced to talk to me, and so I forgot pretty soon about that.

"You got us into this," Prall said.

"That's what you did," added Midgy.

"And we'll fix you, too, for it," said Pratt.

"How did I get you into it?" I asked.

"Telling that cop."

"I didn't tell him anything," I said. "But if I had, you had it coming to you, because you whipped the horses. What did you lie to them about me for?"

"Never mind," Midgy said. "We'll get you, smart alec."

"I'm not afraid of you, Midgy," I said. "You've just got it in for me because I wouldn't let you touch that little German fellow at the store. You'd better look out what you do."

"Look out, eh? I'll never look out for you, I can tell you that."

"You did this morning."

"I didn't."

"Oh, yes, you did. And if you tell things like this about me at the station, I'll remember it."

"We'll tell just what we told the copper, just now, won't we, Midgy?" Prall said.

"If you do, *I'll* do something," I said. I didn't know what I *could* do, but I wasn't going to let them think I was just scared.

"Yes—you'll run and tell," said Midgy. "Anyway, you got the horses scared first, when you jumped in the wagon this morning, or they wouldn't have been scared so easy later."

"Maybe that had a little to do with it," I said. "But I don't care if I did scare the horses then.

It was because you whipped them that they ran away."

"And we won't forget how you made Midgy do more than his share of the work," said Prall, not paying any attention then to what I said.

That made me laugh, though I was ready to do almost anything else. It seemed so foolish a thing for Prall to say.

"Well," I said, "you tried to make everything as bad for me as you could this morning and I had a right to do what I did."

Both Prall and Midgy kept looking around at the policemen every little while, but I thought it was better to walk right straight ahead as if I wasn't afraid, and I wouldn't look around at them at all. About that time we turned a corner and both the other fellows walked closer to me.

"You say you don't care if you did scare the horses this morning?" asked Prall.

"That's what I said," I answered, too angry to care to repeat the rest that I had said.

"You didn't care what you did even if it did

scare the horses?" Prall seemed sort of insisting, to make me say more.

I sneered right in his face. "Scare the horses!" I exclaimed; and then I added, "Yes, and I'd do it again any time and you couldn't stop me, horses or no horses."

And then just at that instant, I felt one of the policemen put his hand on my shoulder, and he turned me around so that I had to look up at him. He wasn't the same one who had stood with me on the curb, but he seemed to be a sergeant or captain or something, though I hadn't noticed before.

"Oh!" he said. "You'd do it again, horses or no horses?"

I knew of course, right then, that he'd come up close and been listening and that he'd heard just the last of what I'd said, and when I looked at Prall and Midgy, I could see that they could hardly keep their faces straight, so I believed they had known he was listening.

"I guess we've learned something here," the

officer said, grinning. "In you go." And he turned me again and I found we were in front of the police station.

I was just sick, and so angry at Prall and Midgy that I could hardly stand still, but I remembered that the other policeman was pretty fair in not blaming me too quickly. Of course, I couldn't have helped myself anyway, so I just walked up the steps of the station, trying to remember the things I'd said last. And every one of the last few sentences seemed to me to sound just as if I had done everything Prall had said I did.

But just as I got to the top of the steps, one of the policemen stopped and spoke and pointed quickly.

"There's the ambulance, now," he said, and I looked and saw the police ambulance coming toward us.

"They got here quick," another officer said. "I didn't think they'd catch us."

They waited, looking at the wagon, and I

waited, too. It all meant that somebody had been hurt by our runaway, and pretty badly hurt, too. At last, I had to ask.

"Was someone hurt?" I asked.

"Well, I guess so," the policeman answered. "A girl was about killed."

Then we waited, while the wagon was backed up to the curb, and then they took out a stretcher, and I could hardly look, I felt so terrible about it. But I did look—just one glance, and, in that glance I saw something I could hardly believe.

The girl on the stretcher was a girl I'd seen before. I tried to remember, but couldn't for a second, just where I'd known her. Then I thought suddenly of the dark hallway into which I had run from the detectives. She was the little girl with the crutches.

CHAPTER IV

A SECRET TO KEEP

I DON'T exactly know just what fainting is like, for I never fainted away in my life. Girls sometimes do and I guess boys do, too, but I never have. But when I saw that poor little girl lying on the stretcher that they took out of the ambulance, and when I saw her eyes closed and the eyelids looking so white, I felt just as if everything else was sort of getting white and milky-dim. I couldn't look again right away, because I felt that if I did I wouldn't be able to breathe.

They passed us on the wide steps and carried the stretcher on into the office, and we followed. But when we got inside, they turned off to the left into another room and we were pushed over to the high desk at the right, where a sergeant looked over his glasses at us and asked our names.

"Witter Whitehead," I said, for I was the first one and ahead of the others.

"Here, here!" the officer back of me said. "None of that—give your right name."

"That is my name," I answered, surprised.

"Nonsense! Nobody ever had a name like that."

"*I* did, though," I said, and they laughed at me. "I mean, I have," I added.

"You give yourself away," said the sergeant. "Now tell me your name without any foolishness, and don't waste time about it."

"My name is Witter Whitehead," I said. It made me sort of angry to have them think it was such a queer name.

But the sergeant turned to Prall and Midgy. "Is that his name?" he asked.

Prall grinned and his eyes turned to me with mischief looking right out of them.

"No," he said. "He's trying to fool you. His name is Barney McGinnes."

Midgy laughed out loud, and I guess I grinned,

too, it sounded so funny. But the sergeant was ugly to me, right away.

"Nothing to laugh at, young man, I can tell you." And then he began to write.

My face went all hot, and I felt like just snatching the pen out of his hand and making him write my name as it ought to be. But in a second I thought I'd just let them do as they wanted to, if they were so suspicious of me that they couldn't believe what I'd said, so I kept still. The sergeant asked Prall his name, and he gave it, and then Midgy gave his. I was a little surprised that they told their true names, after telling mine wrong, but I thought perhaps Prall remembered that it would be easy to call Mr. Farley and find out the truth, and so he didn't take a chance. Of course, our uniforms told where we were from.

Well, then the sergeant started to ask me questions, because I was the first to be written down, I suppose.

"What do you do?" he asked.

"Do?" I repeated. I didn't understand at first.

"Yes, do!" he hollered at me.

"I'm a wagon-boy," I answered.

"How old?"

"Do you mean how old am I?" His way of asking questions puzzled me.

"Of course!" he said. "What are you—a fool?"

I got mad at that. "No," I said, "but I'm not getting a square deal, and if you want me to answer your questions, you've got to ask them so I can understand."

The sergeant laid down his pen slowly, and folded his hands and then leaned down toward me with his eyes and mouth wide open.

"Well, what do you think of that?" he said. "Say, who are you? You must be the chief of police or the mayor or something—or maybe you're the President, in disguise. Wouldn't you like to have me come out and get down on my knees and walk three times around you, and then

write out the questions I want you to answer? Maybe you'd like to have 'em set to music, so we can sing 'em for you. Eh? Anything else you think of that you'd like?"

All the policemen and Prall and Midgy laughed, and I know I blushed, though I didn't think what he said was very funny. But you never do think it's very funny when anybody else is making fun of you. It's queer, though, how it affects the people who look on. So many folks take sides against you just the minute you are laughed at, no matter whether the thing that makes them laugh proves anything or not. And that's the way it seemed then.

Prall broke right in. "You ought to have more sense than to talk like that," he said to me. Then he turned to the sergeant and added: "That's just like him. He doesn't know how to talk decent to anybody, anyway."

"Well, I'll talk to you, then," said the sergeant, pretty sharp. "What's *your* work?"

"I'm a driver," answered Prall. He seemed

just a little taken back by the sergeant's tone, but he was nervy.

"Did you drive to-day?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you let this boy drive, then?" He pointed to me.

"I didn't. He grabbed the lines and twisted us against the curb."

"I didn't!" I cried out, interrupting.

"Aw! yes, you did, too," said Prall. "What do you want to lie for? Didn't he do it, Midgy?"

"Yes, of course," said Midgy.

"I did not, and you know it," I shouted.

"Come now, cut it out," the officer by me said, and put his hand over my mouth. "You've made enough trouble for one day."

"He ran us into the curb and broke our wheel and we fell out," said Prall, while I had to keep still.

"What did he want the lines for?"

"I don't know, he just got fresh."

"Has he ever driven a wagon?"

"No, they don't let 'em drive as young as he is. Besides he's a new boy—only been at the store a week."

"Has he been on your wagon during that time?"

"No. I wouldn't have his kind. He just makes trouble all the time. This is the first day he's been with me, and look at the mess we're in."

"Has he made trouble for other drivers?"

"I don't know about that, but he tried to pick a fight with Midgy here just yesterday."

"I did not! He started it!" I hollered again.

"Keep still there you, will you?" growled the policeman beside me, and he suddenly slapped me and made my ear ring.

It seemed as if I couldn't stand it then. Everybody in the world seemed against me and everybody mean as could be. I ought not to have done it, of course, but I just jumped right at him and struck and struck him, anywhere I could. I seemed to be just sort of crazy and I fought like

anything. I know I felt my fists hit his brass buttons and it hurt, but I didn't care and I fought all the harder. He had no right to slap me and I could hardly think, I was so angry and so confused.

At first he dodged, too, but just in a minute he grabbed hold of my collar and twisted his hand around in it and, next minute, I couldn't breathe at all and I had to stop. Then he loosened his hold a little and looked at me without saying a word, and there were little spots of light in his blue eyes that seemed to just shine. He kept his hand on my collar, though.

I was very much surprised that he didn't say anything, or that the other policemen didn't speak about it. One or two of them were laughing a little, but they all looked at me sort of funny, as if they just hadn't expected such a fuss from me and were astonished or something. I couldn't just tell. I saw Midgy and Prall look at the policeman by me, too, surprised and puzzled, and I didn't know what to think.

In a minute, though, the sergeant began questioning Prall again.

"Who whipped the horses?" he asked him, quick.

"He did," said Prall, pointing to me, and it seemed sort of hopeless to me then, so I just let it all go, and pretty soon I found I was crying just like a baby. That made me ashamed, but I didn't seem to be able to stop.

"Why did he beat the animals?" asked the sergeant.

"Because," said Prall, "because—oh, he's always beating the horses."

"Oh, he is, eh?" said the sergeant, and he looked sort of queer at Prall. "He's a real mean-spirited boy, is he?"

"You bet he is."

"And couldn't you stop him?"

"No—he just grabbed the whip and lammed 'em."

"But he must have had a reason."

"Oh, he was mad."

"Is he in the habit of getting mad easy?"

"Yes, he's always getting mad at nothing."

"What did he get mad at to-day?" The sergeant had taken out a pencil and was writing on a piece of paper beside him, and I thought his voice sounded different. But he went on, slow and cool and paying close attention to everything Prall said.

"He got mad to-day, because he thought we didn't give him enough room on the seat."

"Who's we?" asked the sergeant.

"Midgy and me."

"And did you give him enough room?"

"Yes, lots. He crowded us."

"He did? It seems to me two of you—and one as big as you are—hardly need be crowded by a boy like him."

Prall opened his eyes quick. "Oh," he answered, "that's what he got mad about."

"What?"

"Because we wouldn't let him crowd us."

"I see. Then what?"

"Then he wouldn't do his share of the work of delivering packages."

"No? You made him, didn't you? Certainly he ought to do his share without complaining. Your other friend here looks tired. Did he have to do most of it?"

"Yes, he had most all of it to do. Whitey, there, wouldn't do a thing all the last part of the trip."

"That was mean of him, too, wasn't it? But how could he make you and Midgy do all the work while he did nothing?"

"He took the receipt-book out of the wagon and said he'd run away with it, if we didn't——"

"Didn't what?"

"If we didn't let him ride."

"I see. Why do you call him Whitey?"

"That's his name—Whitehead."

"Oh, it is? I thought you said it was something else—let's see—Barney McGinnes."

Prall's face went red in a second. I'd been so interested that I'd forgotten, too, what he had

said my name was, but the sergeant remembered. I looked around quick and I noticed all the policemen were looking kind of close at Prall, and he saw it, too, and began to get uneasy.

"I did say so," he answered, after a second. "But I was only fooling."

"Yes," said the sergeant. "Were you only fooling, too, when you said he was a new boy at the store?"

"Why—why, no," said Prall, sort of flustered, not knowing what was coming. "No, I wasn't fooling then."

"And you never knew him before he came to the store?"

"No, sir. I sure never did."

"Do you know the driver he has been with since he came?"

"No—that is, I know who he is."

"Never talked with him? He's not a friend of yours?"

"You bet he ain't." Prall grinned, getting easier now. "No, I never talk to him."

"Did you ever see this other driver and young Whitehead, as you now call him, together?"

"Not as I know of."

"How did you know they drove together."

"Oh, Midgy here, he told me that."

"Did you ever see Whitehead on the wagon with the other driver?" asked the sergeant, turning suddenly to Midgy.

"No—no, sir," answered Midgy, startled.

"How did you know what driver he has been going with?"

"Oh, it's always up on the call-board."

"What's the call-board?"

"A board in the office that tells what wagons we go on."

The sergeant turned quickly to Prall.

"Does the call-board tell whether a driver beats his team or not?"

Prall's eyes opened wide again. Then he laughed. "No, of course not," he said.

"Does it tell whether a wagon-boy beats the horses?"

Prall was puzzled again. "Why, no," he said.

The sergeant leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Well," he said, "I guess I understand this now. You are quite clear about everything you've told me here?"

"Yes, sir," replied Prall.

"You haven't told any lies?"

"Why, no—I wouldn't lie to you."

"Only fool with me, eh?" asked the sergeant quickly.

"Why, I haven't done any of that except when I told his name. Then I was just kidding him. It was a joke."

"I see," said the sergeant. "Well, I'm willing to consider that a joke, but if that's the only time in your answers when you were kidding, as you say, the rest of what you say is quite beyond a joke." He leaned forward quickly, and scowled at Prall. "You say Whitehead is a new boy at the store, that you don't know the driver he's been riding with, that you never saw them on the wagon together, and your friend here

says he never did, either. Yet, you have both undertaken to tell me what a mean-spirited fellow he is, how he is in the habit of beating horses, how he is always getting mad at nothing. You yourself told me you never knew him before he came to the store, and from what you say, you have had no chance to know him since he came. Yet you vilify him in every answer you give. You have told me that he crowded you on the seat, which is absurd, on the face of it, because he is smaller than you and there were two of you to one. You tell me he made your friend Midgy here do more than his share of the work, and when I asked you how he did it, you say he threatened to run away with your receipt-book. In the next breath you say he made the threat to compel you to let him ride."

The sergeant stopped a second. Prall's eyes were staring now and his mouth hung open and he looked as frightened as if he was going to be whipped, but the sergeant gave him no chance to speak.

"You've lied to me at least three times since you started. It's fair to suppose that at least half of the rest you've said is lies, and that leaves young Whitehead, here, all to the good. Now, what have you got to say?"

Prall still stared at him for a minute; then his face got burning red again and he looked down. I could just imagine how ashamed he must be, but I was as much surprised as he was, for, though I knew when he was lying, of course, I didn't think how the sergeant was catching him. Midgy was just as scared as Prall was, too, and he looked around quick with his eyes showing white all around, and then he commenced to cry.

"That'll do now," said the sergeant, cross to him, and then he turned to me. "Now, young man," he said, "tell us just what happened."

Well, I felt that it was right to tell all about it then, and I did, and everybody listened all through, and even didn't interrupt. When I got through, the sergeant turned to Prall and Midgy and asked them if what I said wasn't the truth.

Midgy nodded, but Prall just stood looking down and making marks on the white board floor with his shoe. Neither of them said a word and both their faces were redder than ever.

The sergeant turned to me and started to say something, when all of a sudden somebody grabbed me from behind and turned me around, and there I saw the funny little man who had been so mad at me just after the runaway. I hadn't even known before that he was there in the station.

"Well, well, well, well, well," he said, and kept on saying it, two or three times, till I didn't think he was going to stop. But he seemed all worked up and sorry that he'd been mean to me. "Young man," he went on, apologizing, "it wasn't you at all. I see it wasn't. I know it wasn't you. I *know* it wasn't. You're a victim, I can see that —a victim."

Well, I couldn't help laughing then, though I was pretty nearly choking, too, with that funny feeling you get in your throat after any trouble

you have is over and people begin to be good to you again.

"It's all right," I said, for I was afraid I'd cry again if he went on.

But he did go on. "I want to make it right," he said. "I must make it right. I've got to make it right. I insist on making it right. I insist on *making* it right." He turned quickly to the sergeant. "Sergeant, I'll go bail for this boy. He's on the square, he is—on the square. Put down my name. I'm Peter Holborn, of Holborn and Batterson. Here's my card—my card. You know us. Now, I'll go bail for this boy, I will. He's all right. Put me down. I'm Peter Holborn, I am." And he went on till you'd almost think there must be something the matter with him.

But I didn't feel like laughing then, because he pulled a big handkerchief out of his pocket and began to wipe his eyes, and I could see he felt badly that he had said an untrue thing about me. Then I heard him whispering to himself.

"Always in hot water," he was saying. "Always in hot water! Such a temper! Such a fool, I am!" And other things like that. It made me more and more sorry.

Then I suddenly thought that people aren't so mean in the world, after all, for here this man proved to be all right and the policemen all seemed to be all right now, too, and so I got ashamed that I'd made such a fuss, and especially about striking the policeman who stood next to me, so I turned to him.

"I'm sorry I tried to hit you," I said. "I hadn't any business to. I thought nobody could understand me and I didn't know what to do."

And he put his hand on my head, just as quick, and said: "Handsome apology, youngster. That's all right. I hadn't any business to cuff you, either."

The sergeant was talking to Midgy and Prall again, but he turned to me just then and said, "You may go, Whitehead, but keep away from this sort, after this."

Prall turned clear around at that, and gave me one look that I knew meant that he would try to get even sometime. But I wasn't much afraid of him then. Besides, I was thinking about the little girl of the crutches who got hurt by our runaway, and I wanted to know about her. So, I turned right to the officer and asked him where she was.

"Oh," he said. "She's in the matron's room, I guess. Do you know her?"

"No; I've seen her before, that's all. Was she very badly hurt?"

"I don't rightly know," he said. "I guess not, or they wouldn't have brought her here. They'd have taken her to the hospital. Let's go and see."

The little man who talked so fast *insisted* on shaking hands with me, though, before we went, and he put one of his cards in my coat pocket. Then the policeman got a stiff brush and helped me brush all the mud off my clothes, and then we went to the room where I'd seen them take the stretcher. He knocked and somebody opened

the door, but just before I stepped in, I heard some men come into the street door of the station, and I glanced around and looked straight into the eyes of Howard, the detective.

He saw me, too, and I could see that funny change in his face that you can always see in people's faces when they recognize you. He stopped still, too, a minute and then came right towards me, as if he meant to get hold of me, sort of slow. But I didn't wait. I just stepped into the matron's room, and the policeman, who was ahead of me, closed the door without seeing the detective at all. I knew, though, from the way the detective had looked at me, that he hadn't forgotten how Mr. Fleming had spoken to him in the private office and that he thought it was partly my fault and that he hadn't gotten through with me. I was afraid of him, too, ever since I'd seen the way he did with Rick. I expected he'd follow us right into the matron's room, too, and I looked around for a way to get out, but didn't see any. Then, as second

after second, and the minutes passed and he didn't come, I thought he probably knew I couldn't get out any other way, so he would wait for me outside.

But the matron, a gray-haired, kind-faced lady, who, she told me afterwards, stays at the station just to take care of people like the little crutches-girl, as I called her to myself,—the matron came up to us then and the policeman asked about the little girl.

"She's hurt worse than I thought at first, I'm afraid," she said. "I think we'll have to send her to the hospital. It seems she's a cripple anyway, and the doctor said he couldn't tell just how much hurt she was without a careful examination."

"I see," the policeman said.

"But, won't she get well?" I asked. I could have cried, I felt so bad about her.

"Oh, sure she will," the matron answered, looking at me and smiling. "She'll get well—that is, as well as she's ever been, I guess." Then

she spoke to the officer again. "It's funny, though, she won't tell where she lives."

"She won't?"

"No. She just won't answer a question about that. She's clear enough about other things—except her name. I think she gave us a wrong name. She seems scared."

"Queer!" said the policeman.

"How did she get hurt?" I asked, for I wanted to know. I hadn't seen her on the street or anywhere till she was brought into the station and I had had so much trouble with everybody that I hadn't remembered to ask.

"She was in the car," answered the matron. "I don't know how she was hurt, though. Something hit her in the back, she says."

"Can she talk?"

"Bless you, yes. Do you want to see her? Are you a friend of hers?"

"I'd like to see her," I said, "but I don't know her. I've seen her before, and I know where she lives."

"Oh, you do? Well, come in and talk to her a minute then, and afterwards I'll send word by you to her folks. We'll send her to the hospital as soon as the ambulance gets back from a hurry-up call they had."

We went into an inner room, through a door behind a screen, and we found the little girl lying on her back on the matron's bed. She was covered up with a blanket or something, but her eyes were wide open and they looked so frightened that it was too bad for anything. She looked up at me, and then at the policeman, and then at the matron, and then at me again. I felt sort of funny, just at first, because she didn't know me, when I remembered her so well. But, of course, she didn't because she hadn't seen me at all when I saw her.

"Here's somebody to see you, honey, the matron said to her, as kind as could be, and then the girl's eyes stayed right on me all the time. I was a little bashful, for I didn't know just what to say, but when the matron and the policeman

went over to the window to talk together, I didn't seem to mind so much.

"I'm sorry you got hurt," I said.

"Are you?" she asked.

That sort of surprised me. It seemed such a queer answer. "Yes, of course," I said. "I was in the runaway. The horses got scared and ran a long ways before we struck the car. You were in the car, weren't you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Did you get very much hurt?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know? Can't you tell?"

"No."

"Why not? I should think it would hurt somewhere if you got struck in the back."

"My back always hurts," she said, soft and quiet.

That seemed terrible to me, so I had to ask another question quick, so she wouldn't think I was mean to make her speak about it.

"I saw you once before," I said.

"Did you?" she said, her eyes looking at me queer.

"Yes—in your house."

"Where?" she said, and she seemed to think it was very wonderful, or else she was frightened again.

"Back of Fleming's store, just the other night," I said. At that minute I couldn't just remember how long ago it was, for so many things had happened in such a little while that it seemed as much as a week.

"I don't know when," she said.

"It was last night," I said, remembering. "I ran into the back door of a hall at your house, to get away from some people, and you came out pretty soon afterwards, while I was there, and you looked out of the door first and then locked it and carried away the key."

"Yes," she just whispered quickly. "Was you in the hall?"

"Yes," I said, "and I had to go out up the stairs and over through the front of the build-

ing, and a man chased me and I fell headlong downstairs."

She looked at me a long time, hardly breathing, and then she said, "I believe you *are* the boy."

"Of course I am, but how do *you* know? You can't see in the dark, can you?"

"I heard you and then I saw you through the front window, when father chased you."

"Was it your father chased me?"

She jumped, as if she'd said something she ought not to, and then she looked at me.

"Yes," she said. "And it was him you locked out into the alley. He thought I did it. But don't tell," she added, whispering again.

"No, of course not," I said, "but why not? It won't hurt anybody now."

"Because," she said.

"That's no reason."

"It is one for me."

"Well, he didn't catch me, so it's all right."

"And don't tell them where I live," she said,

all at once, and so anxious that it surprised me again.

"Not if you don't want me to," I said. "But why?"

"Never mind," she answered, "only don't, please—to please me."

She smiled then, but I saw something was hurting her by the way the red went out of her face, and it scared me so that I called the matron quick, but before the woman came, the girl grabbed hold of my hand and whispered again:

"Don't you never, never tell, or I'll never forgive you—you promised."

"What's that that's promised?" asked the matron, who came over to us quick. "What's the matter, little one?"

"Nothing—just my back," she said, and she smiled again.

I felt awfully sorry for her, because it was perfectly plain it hurt her, and I pretty soon found out that she smiled every time the pain came, just

as if she was bound not to let anybody know anything about it.

"You'd better go then, my boy," said the matron to me, and I got up, but the little crutches-girl turned quick and held out her hand.

"Promise! Promise me!" she said, almost crying, "never, never, cross your heart."

"I never, never will," I said.

The matron laughed. "What a solemn promise!" she said.

But the little girl looked so afraid that I reached over and took hold of her little, thin hand and just squeezed it, so she'd know. And I was glad I did, because her face looked easier again, just as I went out. It seemed very strange —mysterious, father says to call it—that she wouldn't let me tell where she lived. I remembered when I got to the door, too, that she hadn't told her name, either, but I couldn't go back and ask her then.

The matron followed me into the outside room. "You go and tell her mother—that she's hurt,

will you? And tell her that she will be at Mercy Hospital, where she can find her to-night." Then she turned to speak to the policeman again for a minute, and I didn't listen, because I couldn't think of anything but the little crutches-girl. Of course, I wasn't to blame because she got hurt, but it seemed sort of like it because I had been in the wagon that made the collision. It seemed hard enough for her that she should have to be lame anyway, without getting hurt again the way she was now. I wondered how it would feel to be lame, so you had to use crutches all the time, and I thought then of how awful it would be if she was hurt now so she never could walk even that way again.

I began to feel as if I'd known her quite a while now, though I never saw her but once before. I was so sorry for her, and, even if I wasn't to blame for getting her hurt, it seemed very queer that I should be the one to see her first here after seeing her in the dark passage. It's funny how those things happen the way

they do. It's just like when you learn a new word at school, you're almost sure to find it in a story-book the very next day—or the next. I'd only seen her once, just happening to then, and here I'd talked to her and I was the only one who knew where she lived, and she'd made me promise not to tell. And I never would tell, either, though it seemed sort of a foolish thing to promise.

I was wondering how I was going to keep from telling the policemen though, for I thought probably they'd ask me, and I was sorry I'd said I knew where she lived, when our policeman turned around and opened the door. I'd been so busy thinking that I'd forgotten a good deal about the things that had happened with the sergeant, but when the door opened, I looked out and thought of Prall and Midgy, right away, and wondered if they had been kept or let go. But I didn't have a minute, hardly, to look around, for the instant I stepped out of the room, I saw Howard the detective standing over by the desk.

He had his back to us and didn't look around

at first, so I thought I'd perhaps get away without his seeing me. So I just said good-by and thank you to the policeman and was just turning towards the door, when Howard whirled around quick, and shouted:

"Here! Stop that boy! I want him!"

CHAPTER V

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

When the detective shouted out at me, it made the cold shivers run up and down my back and I went weak all over, but I knew that I'd rather do almost anything than be caught by him, for I knew he probably just wanted to try to make me confess things that weren't so. I was so tired and my head ached now so hard, that I felt as if I couldn't stand much more, so I turned, just as quick as I could, and ran for the door.

It was only a few steps away and it stood wide open, and as nobody was so near to it as I was, I got there and out before they could stop me. I really think nobody tried very hard, for, though two or three policemen moved when Howard yelled, they didn't move very quick. But I heard Howard's feet run across the marble floor, loud, and I ran like lightning down the steps and

then across the street and around the corner, and so away toward the store. Once I looked around —just as I turned the corner it was—and Howard was still after me. I can remember just how he looked, for he ran with his shoulders all humped up and his head back, as if it was hard work for him to run at all.

I thought I could beat him, and I did. I ran all the way to the store. Of course, it wasn't very far, but as I said, I was tired out and had a headache, and when I got there it seemed as if the top of my head would come right off, because I had run so. But I found Mr. Farley and some of the boys in the shipping-room, and Mr. Farley made me stop and tell him about the runaway, of which he'd heard. I told him Howard was after me, but he surprised me very much by saying that he thought Howard would let me alone and would never come to the store after me, because Mr. Fleming was angry about the way he had done with Rick. He said Mr. Fleming had told him all about it, and it seems

Mr. Fleming was a good deal more angry at Howard than I had thought. Mr. Farley said he had told him that he wouldn't have Howard around the place again.

Well, I wasn't much afraid then, so I told Mr. Farley and the boys who were there all about our runaway and all about what happened at the police-station, only I didn't say anything about the little crutches-girl. Some way I didn't seem to want to tell about her. I was afraid they wouldn't understand, and a fellow can't talk about a girl before a crowd like that. But they were all as interested as could be in the rest of the story. I found out that there weren't very many who liked Prall and Midgy, and that they thought I did all right in it all. Mr. Farley said, of course, it was very unfortunate, because the wagon was all smashed up, and it didn't do horses any good to run like that, but he didn't talk much about it.

It was pretty late then, and so we weren't very busy and we talked quite a long time, and while

we were talking Rick Neufer and Dib Web came in. I found out afterwards that they had been put on a new wagon together, with a driver they liked, so it was pretty nice for them. I wished we three could be together, for I like Dib Web, and of course Rick is a mighty nice little fellow. I thought Dib was almost old enough to drive, too. He is bigger than I am.

Well, when I got through talking to them, I knew I had to go and tell the little crutches-girl's mother about her, so I asked Mr. Farley to let me go out for a few minutes, and he looked at me sharp, and seemed to see I had a headache, and he told me to go home and not come back till morning; so I started.

I went out through the front way and then around the store, for I didn't want anybody to wonder where I was going. But I never thought of anything else, but just of the little girl and her folks, when, all at once I looked up, near the corner of the store and the alley, and there I saw the blind man. I remembered then that he had

said to come see him again, about his plan for trapping the store-thief, so I turned to go to him then.

"Hello!" he said, before I'd really gotten up to him.

"Hello!" I said. "How'd you know who it was?"

"I can tell footsteps," he answered.

"I don't really believe you know who I am now," I said.

"Oh, yes, I do. You're the boy that crawled out of the window."

That sounded as if he could tell, but still he might have known my voice. It wouldn't seem as if he could tell my walk when so many people were passing all the time.

"You said you wanted to see me again," I said.

"I wish I *could* see you, my dear boy," he answered, sad.

It seemed to me I just said things to make people feel bad that day. I'd hurt the little

crutches-girl, and now I thought I'd hurt him, but he didn't seem to mind after a minute.

"I meant to say that you said you wanted to talk to me," I said as carefully as I could.

"I do," he said, "but I'm not ready yet, and won't be for a few days now. So you come and see me the first of next week. Monday or Tuesday night will do."

It was only Wednesday night then, so that made me a little impatient. But I had a good many things to do, and it seemed such a long time since I had been home, even though it was just that morning, that I wasn't all sorry.

"Well, I'll come," I said, and then I went on.

I went around the block into the next street, and to the doorway where I'd run away from the man who chased me, after I first saw the little crutches-girl. I had to think a little to figure out which would be the building the little girl lived in. I remembered that the curtained door she had gone into from the dark passage was on the left side, so I knew of course, that from the front,

the place she lived in would be on the right of the stairway. I looked at that place and found a funny, narrow little store between two of the big ones. It had some old dusty-looking things in the window, and seemed a curious sort of place. I found out that the man who kept it sold old things—I mean things that are so old that people like to have them for curiosities, whether they are pretty or good for anything or not. Most of the things I saw in the window were not, I thought.

I went inside and found an old man there. He had a white beard and wore spectacles in black frames and scowled at me. He was working over some old book, turning the leaves over and over and over, first one way and then the other, and looking up and down the pages. He looked at me once and scowled, then back at the book again, then at me and scowled again.

"What do you want, boy?" he asked.

"I want to find if a little girl lives here," I said.

"What girl?"

"A girl that I saw here yesterday."

"You never saw a girl here."

"Yes, I did."

"No, you didn't."

"Well, it was at the back door."

"That isn't here."

"No," I said, and I wished he wouldn't be so particular. "She was at the back door."

He stared at me in a funny way.

"Well?" he asked.

"Does she live in here?"

"I told you no."

I thought he needn't be so cross and almost told him so, then I remembered about getting mad at the policeman and how sorry I was for that, and so I tried not to care. Maybe this man would be all right, too, when I knew him.

"Well, I mean, do you know where she lives?" I asked him.

"Why don't you say what you mean the first time? What is her name?"

"I don't know."

"Well, how do you expect me to know her if you can't tell me her name?"

"This one has crutches," I said. I hated to say it, for I thought maybe he was her father,—but I had to.

"Crutches?" He looked up quick.

"Yes, sir."

"What do you want of her?"

"I want to see her mother."

"What for?"

"I've got to tell her something."

"Well, she hasn't got any mother."

He said it very quick and sharp, and it startled me so much that for a minute I didn't know what to say, and then I said right out the thing that I thought.

"Oh, the poor little girl!"

I was almost as sorry for her as I could be before, but when I found out that she didn't have any mother to take care of her when her back hurt her, it seemed as if she didn't have any-

thing much. But the man laid the book down quick when I said that and looked at me.

"Who are you?" he asked me.

"Witter Whitehead," I said. "I work at Fleming's store."

"What do you know about the little girl?"

"She got hurt in a runaway I was in to-day, and is going to be taken to Mercy Hospital."

"She is? Well, well! That's bad! Is she bad hurt?"

He began to get quite excited now, and pretty soon he came around the end of the counter and made me come up to the light and looked at me.

"Did you see her?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Where is she now?"

"At the police-station."

"At the station, eh?"

He stopped and looked out of the window, thinking.

"Did she tell you she lived here?" he asked, after a minute.

"No, sir. She wouldn't tell. But I'd seen her before at the back door, so I knew."

"Oh, you had. Do you know her father?"

"No, sir. I thought maybe you were her father."

"No!"

He stopped short again. Then, all at once, he said, "But I'll tell him. Now go!"

Not a word of thanks or of any more questions or anything, and when I looked up at him again, he began pushing me toward the door with his hands on my shoulders.

"Will you tell me her name?" I asked.

"What do *you* want of her name?" he said, scowling again. "No, I won't."

Well, I couldn't do anything else but go out of the store, but I couldn't think what in the world made him act so, as he did. It seemed a very queer thing that he wouldn't tell me her name, and I couldn't understand that at all. There was something very queer about it all. If she wouldn't tell her name or where she lived, and

he wouldn't tell her name, then there must be some very queer reason indeed.

I started away, but I'd only gone a few steps when I heard the old man calling after me.

"Boy!" he shouted. "Here, boy, come back here."

I didn't really want to go, but I thought I'd better, and as soon as I reached him, he put a quarter into my hand and said quickly:

"There now! Go! That's for telling me about her, but don't tell anybody else."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because!" he said, angry. "Don't *tell* anybody else either, if you don't want me after you. I know where you work!"

Well, that was queerer than ever, and when I turned away to go home, I was pretty full of thoughts about it. I didn't want that quarter either, for, though I had promised the little girl not to tell, and didn't intend to tell, I didn't want to be paid like that for it, as if it was some mean thing I was bound to do by it. I thought about

it so much, and it bothered me so much, that I could hardly be comfortable on the train going home at all. What if there was something terrible that made the little girl afraid to tell, and made the old man afraid that I'd tell where she lived? I couldn't think what any such thing might be, but I remembered he seemed not to like it when I said she was at the police-station. I began to think it was pretty serious.

When I got home, mother said I looked as if I was sick, and she made me tell her what the matter was, so I had to tell just part of it. I told about the runaway, and tried to make it as little as I could, for I knew she was all tired out herself. I couldn't let her know the rest, and I didn't get a chance to tell father then, when I felt that maybe I'd better, for he was asleep, and when he waked up, it was after I'd gone to bed. Mother gave me something to eat, and then made me go to bed right away, and stay till morning.

In the morning I felt all right again, and I thought I had done right not to tell, because I

knew both father and mother would think about it and worry about it all day, if I did. I wished father was well, though, so I could tell him, for I wanted to know what to do.

Well, I had a pleasant surprise that day, for I found I was to go out on a wagon that had my old driver,—his name was Halley,—and Rick was to go, too. Mr. Farley told me he had fixed it that way because he wanted me to take care of Rick. I was very glad, only I wished Dib Web could go, too. But Dib had another good wagon. Prall and Midgy weren't there, and nobody knew anything about them before I went out on a trip.

Rick and I talked a good deal that day. I won't need to write about it all, because a good deal of it hasn't anything to do with this story. But he told me all about himself and his father, who was a violin player in an orchestra, and his mother, who gave music lessons, and then he said he could sing. I never thought much about boys singing before. Of course, I knew they did in some churches, and I found out that Rick sang in

the boy-choir at St. Luke's. I was a good deal interested, and asked him a lot about it, and it's very queer how much all that had to do with the things that happened afterwards.

Rick asked me if I wouldn't go to choir-practice with him the next night, because he was going to sing alone—a solo, they call it—in church the next Sunday, and he wanted me to hear him. He talks funny, as I said, and this is how he asked me:

"I would like it that you should hear me to sing."

I didn't laugh at him, because he tried so hard to say everything just right.

"I'll go," I said, "if mother'll let me."

"Good!" he said. "I hope that it is you will like the solo."

"Of course, I will," I said.

His face just smiles all over when he's pleased, and it did then.

"We will go at the seven of the clock," he went on, "because the church is far, and we must

not to be late. The church is where you know." He named the street and I knew.

Well, we had an easy day, that day. Nothing hardly happened at all. I thought about Howard and about Moss, the blind man, and about the little crutches-girl. It was such a little bit of while since I'd first seen any of them, and yet I was so much interested in them all. And I wondered how it would all come out about the thieves at the store. I wished I knew who they were or could find out, because Mr. Farley and Mr. Fleming had been so good to me and Rick. I thought I would be very glad when I could hear what the blind man thought, and what his plan was. It was queer he should be so interested, but I could see how much good it might do him if he pleased Mr. Fleming.

I thought maybe Howard the detective would come to the store after me that night, in spite of what Mr. Farley had said, but he didn't. But something else had happened that I hadn't even thought about. The boys had two newspapers,

one a morning paper and one an evening paper, and in each one of them there was a story about our runaway. And, what do you think, neither of them had it right. They told about it as if they knew all about it, but they didn't tell it alike, and there were things in the stories that didn't happen at all. But the funniest thing was that in both papers they had the names of Prall and Midgy right, but gave mine as Barney McGinnes.

I told Rick and Dib and Mr. Farley about Prall's telling the police sergeant that was my name, for I had forgotten it myself before, and we laughed and laughed about it. But one of the papers went on with a lot more, and when I read that it didn't seem so funny. It said that a little girl had been hurt in the car by a broken piece of window frame hitting her in the back and that she wouldn't tell her name or where she lived. It said that a boy had been found who claimed to know where she lived, and that he had been told to take a message to her people, but that

so far no one had been to the hospital to see the little girl. It was the morning paper that had that part of the story, and so I knew from it that the little girl's father hadn't gone to see her, and maybe the curiosity man hadn't told him to go.

I thought that was the strangest part of the whole thing, for, of course, a man would go to see his little girl very quick, when she was hurt like that, if he knew about it. And I didn't see how anybody could forget to tell such a thing if it depended on him to get the news to the people who ought to care. I couldn't understand it at all, and so, after thinking about it a long time, I told Dib and Rick all about it, but, though they thought it just as strange as I did, they didn't know what to do, either.

"Why don't you go back to the curiosity store and see the man again?" Dib asked.

"Maybe I'd better," I said. So we agreed to go together after the store closed that night, and we did.

Well, when we got to the store where I'd seen the old man with the beard the night before, I left Rick and Dib outside, because I thought it would look funny for them to go in with me, and I went in alone. At first I thought nobody was in the store. There weren't many lights, and it looked pretty dim; but when I made a noise, I heard somebody start from the back part and come very fast towards me, and pretty soon a big, fat young man, with very black eyes and black hair and skin that was almost like an Indian's, came up behind the counter and looked at me.

"Where is the man that keeps the shop?" I asked.

"Right here," he answered.

"Oh, do you own it?" I asked, and I was quite astonished, for I supposed the old man was the owner.

"Yes, what of it?" he said.

"I want to see the old man with the beard that I saw here last night."

"I don't know him," he answered.

"Don't know him!" I exclaimed.

"No," he said. "You're in the wrong store."

For a minute I thought maybe I was, but, when I looked around I remembered the things.

"No," I said, "I saw an old man with a white beard here last night, and I told him about the little crutches-girl, and how she got hurt, and he said he'd tell her father."

The young man shook his head. "No," he said again, "not here."

Well, then I did feel funny. I knew I was right, and I knew I had seen the old man there and had told him about the little girl, and I knew I hadn't dreamed about it, because I still had the quarter he'd given me in my pocket. I couldn't see at all how it was, but I began to think that things weren't right around that store and maybe around the little girl, too, and I got so excited I didn't know what to say. The young man just stood looking at me, with his elbows on the show-case and his big fat fingers folding a piece of

paper over and over. Then, all at once, I thought I just *had* to find out about it.

"But I *know* I saw him here," I said, "and I came again because the little girl's father didn't go to the hospital to see her, and I thought maybe the old man didn't tell him, or he was sick or something."

"No," said the young man, again, still shaking his head. "You've made a mistake. It wasn't here. You've got another guess coming. Go look in next door."

He turned away from me, and I had to leave then, for I could see that he would never tell me anything, so I went outside and met Dib and Rick and told them. But, right in the middle of telling them, I happened to look up at the store-window, and there, peeking out at me with a very funny look in his face, was the dark-faced young man, and just the instant he saw me look up, he moved back and away from the window, trying to seem careless, as if he hadn't looked.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," I said to

the boys. "I'm going to go upstairs into the building here and over down those back stairs towards Fleming's and see if I can't find somebody else. Maybe, the little girl and her father just lived back of the store, and these people in front haven't really anything to do with them."

I didn't really think that, but I talked just the way you do sometimes, when your thoughts go so fast that you can't keep up with them, and you begin a sentence and then think you have to finish it some way. But Dib and Rick said I ought to go and try to find out, and we talked a little about it. We didn't believe anybody could do anything to me for just trying to find the girl's father, and so, after a while, I started.

The hallway when I went up the stairs seemed pretty dark to me, though the lamp that I remembered was burning again, and I could see all right. It was very still and it seemed, all the time I was in the building, as if no one else were there at all. I found the back stairway, and crept down to the hall without hearing anything but the noise

I made myself. But when I got to the bottom of the stairs and felt for the curtained door, I found a wooden door, tight closed and locked, in its place, and when I knocked, nobody answered.

I went back to the boys, and we all thought everything that happened around that place seemed to make it more mysterious. We talked about it and walked away and back around by the store, and just as we were passing the alley-corner, I looked around and I saw somebody suddenly come out of the back door of that place —the door I ran into on the night I fooled the detectives—and hurry away down the alley, in the opposite direction from ours.

Of course, it might have been somebody from another part of the building, but I thought it looked like the fat young man with the dark face, though I couldn't be sure.

Well, I dreamed about those things that night, but next day something happened that almost made me forget them. Mother said I might go with Rick to the choir-practice, and I took lunch

enough to make supper for the night, too, so that I would not need to go home after the store closed. But when I saw Rick that morning and started to tell him, he didn't pay any attention and just broke right into what I was saying. And when I heard what he said, we didn't talk about anything else for quite a while.

"What you think?" Rick said, interrupting me when I thought he'd be glad to hear I was going, "the store it was robbed last night."

"Robbed?"

"Yes, thieves they did take much solid silver."

"Silver?" I said. "Oh, they've been at it again?"

"The robbing that it was done before was sneak-thief robbing only. This it has been burglary on the large scale."

"Well, but how could they? Where were the watchmen?"

"One of them was beat on the head with a stick till it was that he was insensible and the other is disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

"Yes. It is not that they are able to find him."

Rick looked pale when he said this, and I began to understand how serious it was. We went upstairs into the store, for the silver room was right over us, and we found a terrible-looking place. Of course, the police were there and wouldn't let us in, but one of the first coppers I saw was the big one who went in to see the little crutches-girl with me at the station, and he remembered me. He stood at the door and pointed out to us where the show-cases were smashed in and where the thieves had split open the doors of the big glass closets where the silver was displayed. The room looked as if a gang of men had been through it and clubbed the cases right and left, everything broken that they could lay their hands on. It didn't seem as if they could possibly have done it without somebody outside hearing them, but they hadn't been caught and nobody had any idea who they were.

"Do you think they will catch them?" I asked the policeman.

"I don't know," he said. "I think they haven't much idea who did it, yet. They don't seem to work as if they did."

He seemed kind of angry about something, as if he didn't like the way the others were working, and just then another officer came up and spoke to him, and pretty soon I understood.

"Hello, Benson," said the new man, and that was the first time I knew his name. "You aren't sore, are you?"

"Yes, I am," Mr. Benson said.

"Well, don't you mind," the other man said, "maybe they will have to come around to your idea after a while. It's just because you and Howard quarreled that Maybury won't give you any attention."

I thought anybody might quarrel with Howard, so I didn't blame Mr. Benson, but the two policemen talked till I knew that Howard and Mr. Benson hadn't liked each other for a long

time, because Mr. Benson had made Howard stop being mean to a woman he had questioned one day—probably just like the way Mr. Fleming had made him stop talking to Rick. And Howard had got him transferred from the place he liked to one he didn't like, just to get even.

"But what I want to know, now," Mr. Benson said, after a while, "is, whether this was done by people inside or outside the store. That lock on the east door looks to me as if it was opened from inside first and then smashed afterwards. It doesn't look like a crack's work to me."

"I think there was a confederate inside the store," the other man said. "And I think the Morse gang did the work."

"No doubt about it."

"If we could get our hands into that gang once, we'd put an end to a good many of these burglaries. But they are smooth."

"They've covered their tracks all right. If Howard ever finds 'em, it'll be the best thing

he ever did and will make him chief of detectives."

"Whoever makes the find will be due for promotion."

"Yes, but what chance has anybody but Howard got?"

"Well, Howard hasn't such a good one, for Fleming won't allow him in the store now, you know, and he can only work on the outside."

I liked to listen and I wondered if I would ever get anything I could tell the blind man, to help his plan. I wondered how much he knew, and I wished I could have him talk to Mr. Benson. Still I knew he wouldn't want me to tell Mr. Benson about him or his plan till I asked him first. And that made me wonder if the blind man knew about the robbery.

It was time for us to go back downstairs, and we started, but I told Rick I was going outside a minute, and I did. I ran around to the alley corner, where the blind man often was, hoping to find him, but he wasn't there, and I thought

probably it was too early for him. So I had to go back without seeing him. But after the wagons were loaded, which was about an hour later, I went back again to the corner, and still the blind man hadn't come.

I was thinking about it and was going back slow to the shipping-room, when Dib met me and stopped me just at the head of the stairs.

"Say, Witter," he said, "wait! Don't go down yet."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," he answered, and commenced to walk on past me and motioned me to follow him away from the stairs.

"Hold on," I said. "What's the matter?"

"The police are after you again," he said.

"The police!"

"Yes."

"Well, but what police?"

"I don't know. Nobody I ever saw before."

"Not Howard?" I asked.

"No—oh, no, not him!"

"Well, who?"

"I don't know, I tell you."

"How do you know they want me?"

"I heard 'em ask Farley if a boy named Barney McGinnes works here."

CHAPTER VI

THE MAN WHO LIGHTED MATCHES

At first I wanted to laugh when Dib said the police were looking for Barney McGinnes. Then I began to think that was very strange, for they knew that wasn't my real name. Then I couldn't imagine what they wanted of me, and I began to worry, because it might be something more about Prall and Midgy, and I didn't want to be mixed up in that any more if I could help it.

So Dib and I waited for quite a while, till we thought the policemen might be gone from the shipping-room, and then we went back. And the very first people we met were Prall and Midgy, together, just coming out of the place. They both looked at me, and Prall sort of stopped and then Midgy stopped, and then they both came over towards me. I thought they were going to fight, so I told Dib to keep close to me.

"You're a fine one, aren't you?" Prall said, commencing first.

"I don't know what *you* might call it," I answered.

"You squealed on us."

"You started it."

"And you got us arrested."

"I didn't. You got yourself arrested. I don't care anyway. You had it coming to you."

"Is that so? Well, you've got something coming to you, too, now. We ain't going to forget. You think it's mighty good that we got fined, and you'll know pretty quick that we're fired, too. But we're going to remember you."

I was a good deal surprised to hear what they said, but I wasn't so much afraid of them, for I thought the only thing they could do now was to try to catch me alone on the street sometime and whip me. I know Midgy could never dare try it alone, and, after the way Prall had acted when I made him let me into the wagon, I thought I could take care of myself. So I just turned

then and walked on and didn't pay any attention when they hollered "coward" after me.

But when we got to Mr. Farley's desk, the first thing he said to me was: "Whitehead, a policeman has been here asking for Barney McGinnes. I guess he meant you."

"What did he want?"

"He says you told them at headquarters that you knew where that little girl lived who was hurt."

"I did."

"Well, they wanted to know if you told her folks, and then they wanted to know where the place is. I couldn't tell 'em, but I said you'd be back this noon. I thought you'd gone out."

"No," I said.

Then I began to think pretty fast. If they asked me to tell where the little girl lived, it would be hard for me to keep my promise not to tell, and, if I kept my promise, they might make me go to jail, I thought. Then, if I didn't tell the police about how I couldn't get word to

the little girl's father, perhaps nobody would ever go to see her, and that would be terrible. I was always so sorry for her, every time I thought of her, and everything about her seemed so strange, I began to worry because maybe I wasn't doing the right thing not to let her know I couldn't find her father or to tell the police, in spite of my promise, where she had lived.

I thought and thought that morning while we were out on the wagon, and by the time noon came I had made up my mind what to do. I thought I would just tell the policeman to take me to see her, and then I would tell her what I'd found at the curiosity-store and ask her to let me tell the police, so they could find her father.

But when I got in at noon, no policemen were there, and if they had been, I guess Mr. Farley was so busy he'd forgotten about it for the time. I found something else new had happened, though. Mr. Fleming had offered a reward of two hundred dollars to the person who should find out who the burglars were and where they were, and every-

body was talking about that. Lots of the boys said they thought, if they were detectives, they could find the robbers easy. And lots of others got to telling what they would do with the two hundred dollars if they got it.

Of course, we talked about it, too, Rick and Dib and I, but I was sure we'd never get any chance at it, though I wished we could. I knew it would be very easy for any thieves to fool boys, because I knew the people in the curiosity store had fooled me and I couldn't do anything, even when I was positive they weren't telling the truth.

Well, I went out on the wagon again that afternoon, and we worked all the rest of the day, and when I came in again, still the policemen hadn't come back. So then I made up my mind I'd go up to the Mercy Hospital the next day, which was Saturday, for we always have half a holiday every second Saturday, and that was mine. And I would see the little girl, if I could, and tell her all about everything, so she

could tell me how I was going to send word to her father. I thought, maybe, by that time, her father would have come to see her, anyway, for it wouldn't seem as if it could be possible she would be away from him so long, without his knowing where she was.

Before the store closed, I went again to look for Moss, the blind man, but I didn't find him, and a man who keeps a stand across the alley said he hadn't been there that day. So I went back, and Rick and I ate our supper on the loading platform, back of the store, after closing time. Then we started away for the church where Rick was going to sing at choir-practice.

The church was in a part of the city that wasn't very good. It wasn't very far from a branch of the elevated railroad and some good streets were near the one it stood on, but most of the people who lived near it were poor people and the church was for them. Rick and some of the other boys went there because their folks wanted them to learn to sing, and the man who

played the organ in that church taught them free to pay them for singing Sundays in church. Rick was one of the best of them all, too. I found out, that night, that he could sing better than lots of people I've heard, and everybody else around there thought so, too.

But it was the queer thing that happened—a very lucky thing—that made that time of the choir-practice have anything to do with this story. I liked to hear the boys sing when they were all singing together, and I liked to hear Rick alone, but when some of the others were singing I got tired and looked around for something else to do. I got interested in watching the man at the organ and I watched him pulling the stops and working pedals and things, till I thought maybe if I could get up in back of the organ, I could see how it all worked and how it made the music different at different times.

I was sitting down in the church where it was dark, for there wasn't any light anywhere except up where the boys were. But I'd seen the door

at the side of the loft where you could go in behind the organ, so I thought I'd try and see if I could get in, and I did. I left the seat where I was and kept out of the light where it fell in the aisle, and then climbed up the little stairs and so back into a dark hole of a place where everything smelled dry and dusty and queer.

I'd never been in an organ before and was sort of puzzled, but I found a light around at the back at last, and then I was there quite a while, watching the bellows, that was worked by a water-motor, and trying to see what the stops all did. The music roars so inside an organ that it almost makes you deaf, like a big bell or a cannon when you stand close to it, but I got used to it after a while. But by-and-by I climbed up a ladder there was in there to see things up at the top, and when I'd got up quite a little way, I found an open window in the back of the church.

I looked out and found that there was an alley right down under me. I couldn't see very well, but I could make out things like shadows.

I could tell there were boxes and barrels and ash-cans and things like that, and there were spots that looked white where paper was lying around, but for quite a few minutes I didn't see anything move. It was so quiet and dark, and the air and the darkness seemed so soft and so sort of mysterious, that I just looked and looked, and wished the moon would come out so I could see.

All at once, while the organ was quiet for a minute, I heard somebody coming along the stones of the alley, just a little distance away, and I got interested very quick. It's a queer thing. I don't know why I cared at all, but it seemed to me that I wanted to watch and see how a man looked in such a dark place and to find out, maybe, what house he would go to—for the buildings were all houses, across the alley, and I had a feeling then that he was on his way to one of them.

I couldn't see him at first, but I heard his voice in some sort of a noise he made when he ran

into something in the alley. I watched for him, but I heard him knocking about among the things for a long time, it seemed to me. First, his foot would hit a tin and it would rattle on the stones. Then I could hear his heels knock on the cobbles. Then I heard a tapping noise, like a stick rapping on the stones, and it came to me all of a sudden that it must be a cane. And then, at last, I saw his figure, just something a little blacker than the things around it and moving, moving along slowly, on account of the darkness, but eagerly, too, as if in a hurry.

He walked right under my window and his head couldn't have been more than six feet from mine, I guess, and then he crossed over just a little further on and stopped. I heard him fumbling at a door-knob and then I heard keys rattle, and after that he seemed to work quite a while trying to find the keyhole, for I could hear him talk to himself and could hear the click of the key against the plate on the door. And then, right in the middle of it, suddenly the organ

behind me burst out into a great crash of noise, and he jumped and crouched down and I could imagine he was looking up, straight at me.

Still, I didn't believe he could see me, for the light below was under a hood and a reflector, and I thought probably none of it reached where I was, so I didn't move, and only stood still thinking that the man was acting queerly. Then, after he found it was only the organ, he stood up again, and after a minute, all at once, he struck a light. And what do you think? I recognized him in a second. Just the second the light fell on his beard and his face, I knew him as well as if it had been daylight, for he wasn't the kind of a man you could make a mistake about. It was Moss, the blind man—and he was lighting matches to find a keyhole!

I was so astonished that I nearly forgot I was on the ladder, and I might have stepped back and fallen off, if just then the organ hadn't stopped short again, and the strange and sudden silence made me think quick and remember. If

you've ever been in a mill, where the wheels are roaring, and then stepped suddenly outdoors, you know how your ears felt, and that's the way mine were for a second, while I stood and watched that blind man find the keyhole, by match-light, unlock the door, and go in.

I guess I must have stood there a long time after that. Of course, the first thing I thought was that he had been just pretending to be blind while he begged on the street, and that sort of startled me, remembering how I had talked to him. Then I remembered how he had told me he could know me by my footsteps, and I understood how he had fooled me in that. After that my thoughts went from one thing to another pretty fast. I remembered that he had caught hold of me pretty easily for a blind man that first time I had seen him. I remembered how he had known about the robbery before I'd told him. I remembered that he had tried to get me interested in a big plan for catching the burglar, and that the very last time I'd talked

with him, he had told me to come back to him Monday or Tuesday.

It all seemed hard to believe, for I couldn't understand what it meant. Of course, he would never let me know he could see, I knew that, and maybe the things he said to me after that first day had been just to make sure that I hadn't any idea that his blindness was a fake. But why he should try to make me come back and talk to him about capturing the thieves, I couldn't tell. It was crooked to take money from people who thought he was blind, too, and if he would do that, probably he would do other crooked things. And yet, he seemed anxious to catch the thieves.

Suddenly another thought came into my mind, and it was so quick and so startling that it made me stop breathing for a minute. What if he was one of the gang of thieves about which Mr. Benson and the other policeman had talked? And what if he had just been acting blind, so that nobody would suspect him while he got things

ready to rob the store? If that was so, then it had been he who had helped make the big robbery, and he had meant to get me to do something for him or to keep me quiet till it was over.

I was so excited about this that I felt I was growing hot all over, but just then I heard the boys of the choir all talking to each other and going down the stairs, and I knew the practice was over and Rick would be looking for me. So I climbed down the ladder and went out where they were, and found Rick and went out into the street with him.

"Rick," I said, when we got outside, "come away from the rest. I've got something to tell you."

"What?" he asked.

"Something very strange—as strange as the queer curiosity-store."

We walked back behind the other boys, who were playing along on the street toward the elevated road, and I told Rick all I knew about the

blind man, from the beginning. Then I told him what I'd seen that night.

"What do you think of that?" I asked, for, though Rick is a little fellow, he seems to have a lot of sense, and you like to hear what he thinks.

"It is very, very peculiar," Rick said.

"Do you think he is one of the burglars?"

"You can't tell, at all. It's not possible to tell. He may be of them one, but it is that he is not honest, anyway."

"It certainly is," I said, not meaning to imitate Rick, but forgetting.

"We can only wait and see in the daylight of the morning, whether he is playing at the blind man again," answered Rick, not noticing.

"Yes. But he wasn't there to-day—the very day after the robbery. What do you think that means?"

"What is it you call it—a coincidency, perhaps?"

I didn't know what he meant then, and I was

a little ashamed that he knew more words than I did. I found out that it just means when two or three very different things happen so as to all fit in together and make what you are doing come out different from what you expect—that's a coincidence. Rick didn't have it just right, that was all.

But I didn't answer the question then. I just said, "It's very queer."

"He may be innocent of any wrong except that only he deceives the people that he may get the dimes and the pennies," said Rick.

"Yes, or if he is one of the thieves, they may be keeping the stolen things in that house."

"Or, that may be where he lives at."

"Or, perhaps that's their meeting-place."

"Maybe they are meeting there now."

I wanted to go back and up through that alley and look, but the organ-player came up behind us just then and made us hurry and catch the other boys, because he said he couldn't have us alone on the streets, for our fathers and mothers

wouldn't like it. I knew mine wouldn't, too, so we hurried on and took the train for home.

But next morning Rick and I were both looking for the blind man before we went out, and we found him gone again that day. Father laughs at me for that last sentence and won't tell me why. Perhaps it isn't just exactly right, but it means what I mean. The blind man, Moss, wasn't there. He wasn't there at noon again, and, by that time, I began to think he wasn't going to be any more.

I guess my head was so full of all the things that had happened that I couldn't think about work that morning. I know I delivered two things wrong, and Mr. Farley spoke about it to me afterwards. But one thing got into my mind, and wouldn't get out, and that was that maybe I could find out, if I was careful, whether Moss was one of the thieves or not, and if I could, maybe I could tell Mr. Benson, and he could go and find out about the rest. And I made up my mind to keep still about it. I only

told Rick that I meant to watch again for the blind man, to see if I could see anything else queer about him.

When noon came and my work was done for the day, I went upstairs to look in the silver room again, to see if there was anything more I could see that the burglars had done, but I found about everything straightened up. There wasn't anything left to show that there had been a burglary, except some scratches on some of the cases, for new glass had been put in and nothing else much had been broken. They were putting a new lock on the door, where the broken one was, while I was there, and business was going on just the same as usual.

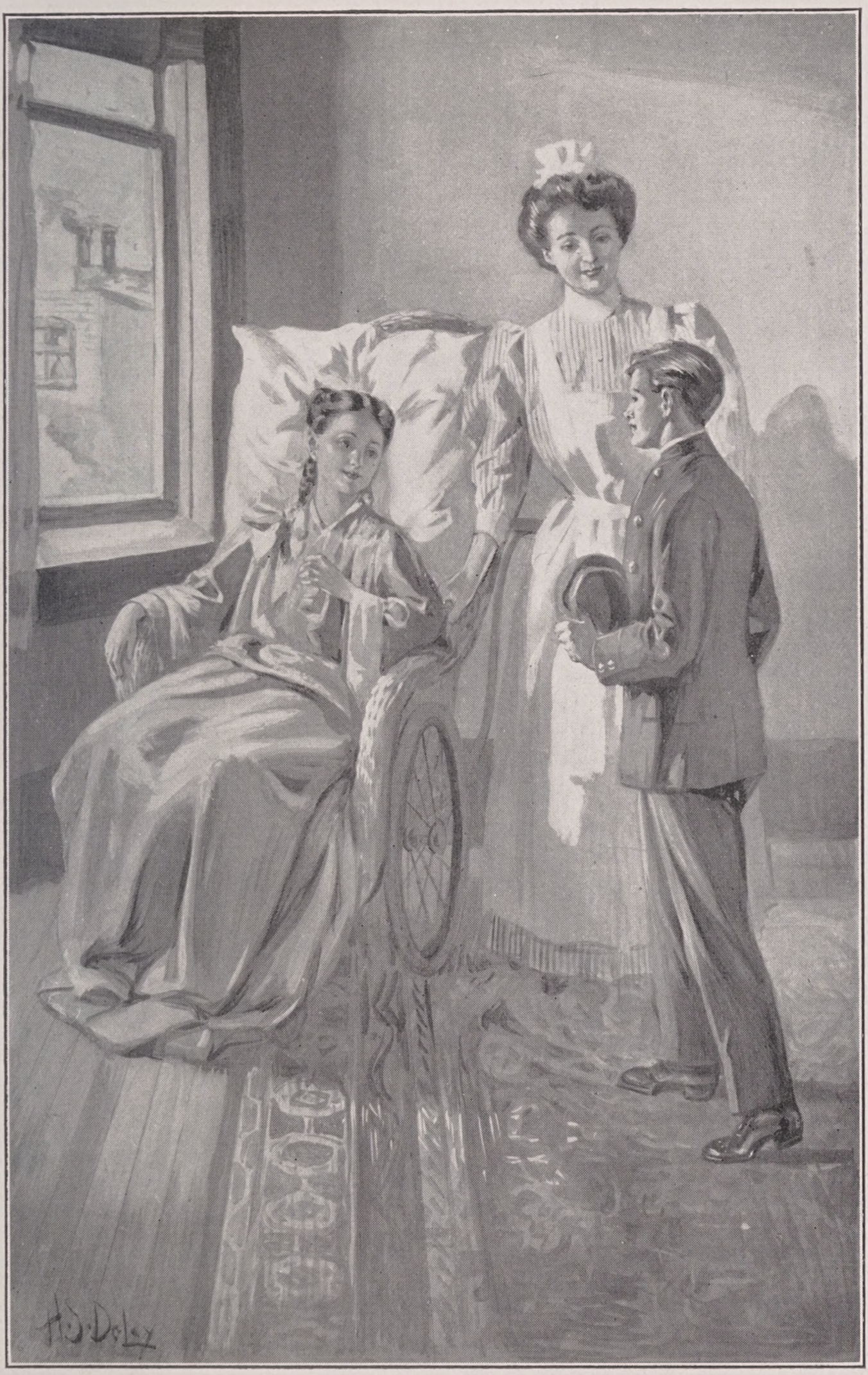
Then I went and got my lunch, and right afterwards I started for Mercy Hospital. I had to walk, and it is a long way from the store, so I had quite a while to think before I got there. Then I asked for the little crutches-girl, and had a hard time to make them understand who I meant. But at last a nurse came up where I

was talking with a clerk, and she seemed to know what I wanted, so she took me right in, and in about two minutes I was with the little crutches-girl.

But she wasn't in bed, as I'd expected she would be. She was sitting up in a wheel-chair, by a window and looking out, and when the nurse and I came up, I saw her face, and it looked so white and so sort of anxious that all the feelings I'd had of being sorry for her came back and made me feel as if I could hardly speak to her without showing them too much.

"Here, my dear, here's a friend come to see you," the nurse said to her.

Of course, I knew the little girl wouldn't expect to see me, but when she turned and did see me, she jumped so hard and her face turned so red all at once that I was almost sorry I'd come; but the nurse went away quickly, for lots of people were visiting at that time, and she had to see to them, and so we were all alone by that window.



SHE JUMPED SO HARD AND HER FACE TURNED SO RED THAT I WAS ALMOST SORRY I'D COME.

"How do you do?" I asked, hardly knowing what to say at all.

"I'm getting better," she answered, but she seemed a good deal more afraid than I was, and that made me feel better.

"I kept my promise," I said.

"Did you?" she asked, quick. And then she smiled. "Of course," she said.

That made me feel pretty good, because it's nice to know that anybody trusts you. And she did me.

"But I wish you'd let me tell now," I said to her.

"Tell? Oh, no!"

"Yes," I said. "I couldn't find your father and I thought——"

But she interrupted me in the middle of that sentence. "My father!" she said.

"Yes, I went to find him—to tell him you got hurt."

"Oh! Couldn't you find him?"

"No."

Her eyes opened just the way they had at the police-station, and she seemed puzzled.

"But he's there," she said, at last, as if she'd just made up her mind to talk to me about it.

"Well, you see, I don't know him and I can't tell which he is."

"Well, but they would tell you, wouldn't they?"

"I didn't know his name."

I went on then and told her all the things that had happened, and she listened just as if it was a story I was telling. She was interested, and she even laughed a little once or twice. But she got pretty serious before I finished, and when I got to the end she was staring at me, frightened.

"Then he's gone!" she said, when I told her the dark-faced young man claimed not to know about anybody else being in the curiosity-store.

"Who?"

"Father! They've taken him away with them."

"But he will come here to see you, won't he?"

"No—they won't let him."

"Let him?"

"No."

"Who?"

"The men you saw." She looked at me queerly a minute, and then she suddenly put her hand on my arm. "Oh, I'm going to tell you," she said. "You won't tell, I know, and maybe you can help me."

"What is it you want?" I asked. "How do you mean, the men won't let your father come to see you? How can they stop him?"

"They won't let him know I'm hurt."

"Oh, won't they?"

"No."

"Do you mean the man with the beard?"

"All of them. They're all in it together."

"Well, but can't your father do as he likes?"

"No—not now."

"But he's a man!" I said, surprised.

"Yes, but he knows," she answered.

"Knows what?"

"About them."

"What about them?"

"Why, he knows what they are doing, and they know something about him—and they've been trying to make him join them."

"Well, but what are they doing?"

"Don't you understand?"

"No. I thought they were selling curiosities."

"They are—but——"

She hesitated and waited and then, all at once, she commenced to cry like everything, and the nurse came running and asked me what was the matter, and I couldn't tell. Then the nurse said I'd have to go, but the little crutches-girl caught hold of me and held on and said it wasn't my fault she cried. So the nurse let me stay a little longer. Then, after she had gone, the little girl turned her eyes to me, and they were all brimming around the edges with tears.

"You will help me?" she said. "I've got to do something. Say you will help me."

"Sure I will," I said. "What is it?"

"Get word to my father."

"I will," I said. "But tell me why the men won't let him come here."

"They're afraid."

"Why?"

She looked all around as quickly as if she was afraid to say it even, and then she bent over to me and whispered.

"They're thieves!" she said.

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

I WASN'T so very much surprised to hear that the people in the curiosity-store were not honest. But when the little crutches-girl said they were thieves, an idea suddenly came into my head, and I wondered why I hadn't thought of it before. Perhaps, if those men were thieves,—and surely, the little girl must know,—perhaps they were the ones who had robbed the store, and maybe that was why everything was so queer around that place.

Anybody would know the little crutches-girl was telling the truth. Just looking at her would show you that, and then besides, she never would tell anything like that unless it was so, because it would be foolish.

"Then that's why you didn't want to tell where you lived?" I asked her.

"Of course," she said. "If they went there to find father there would be sure to be some trouble, and then he would have been in it with the others."

"But how can they keep him from getting away from them? Do they keep him in the house?"

"No, but they watch him."

She was crying again now, but softly, looking out of the window and trying not to let anybody, even me, see her.

"But your father won't join them?" I asked, wondering very much.

"No, but, oh, I'm afraid he will do something that will get him in with them. He did something once—oh! I can't tell you. He doesn't know that I know it. And they try so hard to make him join them, and he is so poor and so discouraged and so mad at everybody because he has to work so hard and is sick a good deal."

That seemed a queer reason for being mad at everybody, but I didn't say anything about it.

"But he's so good to me," she added, after a minute. "He thinks so much of Fred and me."

"Who's Fred?" I asked.

"He's my brother. Father is so afraid Fred will ever get in with these men that he won't let him come home at all. It seems strange, doesn't it, when he is thinking all the time—I know he thinks so—that maybe he will join them himself. And he doesn't think I know anything about it."

I didn't know what to say then. It seemed so kind of impossible to me. Just think, if your father was thinking maybe he'd be a thief! Why, it didn't seem as if any man could ever think about such a thing. But, of course, some boys' fathers aren't always like your own father—and it makes you very sorry for them—for the boys, I mean. I had to think quite a few minutes though, before I could believe that the little crutches-girl's father could be such a man as she said.

"Where is your brother?" I asked her, at last.

"He works in a store, down town."

"Couldn't I take word to him?"

She looked at me very queerly for a minute, and then she turned away again.

"No," she answered, "I don't know just what store it is he works in."

"Oh!" I said. "Well, then, you just let me take word to your father—I'll get it to him."

"If I could only walk!" she said, and the tears began to run out of her eyes again, only now they were still and quiet and she didn't sob.

"Can't you ever?" I asked. I couldn't help asking her, because it seemed awfully mean not to say anything, and I wanted to know if somebody couldn't do something for her.

She didn't answer for a minute, then she turned and looked at me again, and her eyes were big and round and sort of scared, as they'd been when she made me promise not to tell where she lived, only in a different way.

"I guess not," she said.

"Did you ask the doctor?"

"Yes."

"Is your back worse, because you got hurt?"

"No."

"What did the doctor say?"

"Not very much."

"Did he say you couldn't ever walk?"

"Oh, I can walk with crutches."

It seemed as if she was trying not to tell me what the doctor said, and I wondered why. But it made me think that maybe I could ask the nurse about her. I thought probably her father would ask me.

"How shall I find your father?" I asked her.

"He works in a cigar-store on the corner."

"What's his name?"

"His name is——" Then she stopped. "You aren't going to tell, are you?"

"No, of course not."

"His name is Midgley."

"Midgley!" It startled me to hear her say that name.

"Yes. Why?"

"Does your brother work at Fleming's?"

"I don't know."

"A boy by that name works there. I know him."

I didn't want to say any more about him, because maybe Midgy was her brother, though it seemed very queer if it was so.

"Oh, do you?" she asked. "Well, ask him if he has a sister by the name of Flora."

"Is that your name?"

"Yes. And if he says yes, you can tell him about me being up here at the hospital."

"All right," I said.

But I felt pretty bad then. I didn't know where Midgy was now, for, of course, he had left the store that very day and I hadn't any idea where to look for him. But I made up my mind to try to find him and know whether he was the little girl's brother or not. And if I couldn't find him, I could go to her father now.

Well, we didn't talk very much more, for I wanted to hurry, and when the nurse came by

pretty soon, I asked her to show me the way out. Then I said good-by to Flora, as she had told me her name was, and went away with the nurse and out of the ward.

"Will you tell me something?" I asked the nurse, while we were going downstairs.

"What do you want to know?" she said, smiling like a very nice kind of person.

"Can the little crutches-girl ever walk?"

"Is that what you call her?" the nurse asked.

"I mean Flora!" I said, quick.

Then the nurse stopped on the stairs and looked at me.

"Do you know her father?" she asked.

"I'm going to see him," I said.

"You tell him, then," she answered, "that Dr. Carter thinks she could get well and walk all right, if she had an operation."

That made my heart just jump, it seemed such a good thing after all the other things I'd heard about the little girl. But I could hardly believe it at first.

"Do you mean she could get so she wouldn't need to walk on crutches any more?"

"Yes. One of the bones in her spine is out of place, and if it can be put back she might walk all right."

"Why doesn't Dr. Carter do it?"

"He doesn't want to undertake it, but he wants to get a great surgeon who knows how better."

"Well, then, why don't they do it right away?"

"You don't understand, do you?" she said, smiling again. "Great surgeons can't work for nothing. It costs a great deal of money to have an operation."

"How much would this cost?"

"Oh, I don't know—maybe three or four hundred dollars."

That just about made me discouraged. I knew they didn't have any money. That was what Flora said made her father so mad at everybody. But I made up my mind to tell him about it, and maybe he could get the money somewhere.

Well, I went away then, and I hurried as fast as I could, for there were so many things to think about and do. But I kept thinking and thinking about Midgy being the brother of Flora, and what I would say to him about her if I could find him. I almost ran part of the way down to the store first, and I went in and asked Mr. Farley, who was still at his desk, if he knew where Midgy had gone. He seemed surprised, but he didn't ask any questions, and just said that Midgy hadn't told him. Then I went around to the place I knew Flora meant when she said "the cigar store on the corner," and I found it closed up and a sign in the window, "We close Saturdays at 1 o'clock."

Of course, that made it so I couldn't see Mr. Midgley till Monday, and I felt pretty badly about that, for it would keep the little girl waiting. But there was nothing else to do, but wait. Still I didn't feel as if I could just go home and not send Flora any word, and I didn't want to walk way back to the hospital again. So I went

and got a postal card and wrote on it carefully this way:

"Please tell the little crutches-girl I can't see her father till Monday, because the store is closed."

And then I didn't know how to address it, because I didn't know anybody's name except Flora's and it would be just the same as telling them if I wrote that on the card. But at last I remembered Dr. Carter and I wrote it to him at the hospital. Then I went home, and it seemed as if I'd hardly ever been there before, because I'd been so busy with all the things happening that I'd hardly had time to think about the things at home.

It seemed a long time till Monday, though, just as it always does when you're very much excited about something that's going to happen. Probably if I'd known what really was going to happen, I wouldn't have been in such a hurry for the time to pass. But, of course, I didn't.

Well, Monday morning I went to the cigar store to look for Mr. Midgley. I had to wait till just before our wagon was ready to go out, so I was a little late getting there. But when I asked for Mr. Midgley, they pointed to a man working there who looked so much like the crutches-girl that maybe I would have known he was her father if I'd just seen him anywhere. He had the same kind of white eyelids that she had. So I went up to him and spoke right away.

"Are you Mr. Midgley?" I asked him.

"Yes, sir, I am," he said. "And who might you be?"

"I'm Witter Whitehead. I work at Fleming's. Did they tell you that your little girl Flora got hurt?"

He jumped very quick, and then leaned down and looked at me.

"Hurt?" he asked. "Flora hurt?"

"Yes," I answered. "I told the old man with the beard to tell you."

"You did?"

He was excited and he talked loud, but, all of a sudden, he looked around at the other men in the store and saw that they were looking.

"Come here," he said, and took hold of my shoulder and pushed me out into a back room, for the door was right at his side. "Now," he went on, "what about the girl? Tell me that again."

"She's at Mercy Hospital. She's hurt—got hurt in a runaway I was in. They sent me to tell you."

"Is she much hurt?"

I could see the anxious look in his face, and I felt better about the little girl then, because I thought he would take care of her.

"No," I said, "I think she is going to be all right." Then I happened to remember what the nurse said. "If she could have an operation it would make her walk again, without the crutches."

"How do you know?" He looked at me sharp.

"The nurse told me Dr. Carter said so," I answered.

"He did, eh?" He stopped to think a minute. "What time was she hurt?" he asked, taking out his watch and looking at it.

"About eleven o'clock," I said.

His eyes opened wide, like Flora's, for a second, then he looked at his watch. "Why, it's only nine now."

That seemed funny, for I couldn't see what the time then had to do with the time she got hurt. But all at once he caught hold of my shoulders again.

"You don't mean eleven o'clock last night, do you?"

"Why, no," I said. "She got hurt last Thursday."

"Thursday!"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, but why didn't you let me know?"

"I did try to."

"You must have tried hard. Where is she?

Mercy Hospital, you say? Why didn't they send me word?"

"They didn't know where you were," I answered, and I was a little provoked at him, because he blamed me and the hospital people so quickly, when he didn't seem to care at all about not having thought where Flora might be for four days.

"They didn't? Why not?"

"Flora wouldn't tell, and she wouldn't say what her name was or anything."

"Why not?" he asked, sharp.

I felt caught, all at once. I couldn't say I didn't know, because Flora had told me, and I couldn't tell him the reason she'd told me, because maybe that would get her into trouble. I had to wait a minute before I could think what to say.

"I guess she had a reason that she didn't want to tell, either," I answered him at last. But as I looked up at him and he looked straight down into my eyes, I couldn't help blushing. I

felt my face grow hotter and hotter while I looked at him. And then, all at once, he turned sort of half away from me, and towards a window there was there, and his face commenced to get red, too—I was sure it did. But, of course, I couldn't tell what he was thinking about. It might have been because he thought that I didn't believe he was good to Flora. Then, suddenly, he turned to me again.

"How'd you happen to tell Benedict, then?" he asked.

"Who's Benedict?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, and stopped. Then he went on. "How'd you happen to tell anybody? How did you know where to go?"

"I'm the boy who ran through your back hall one night last week," I said, "and you chased me up the stairs."

"Oh," he said again, "you are, eh?"

"Yes, and I saw the little girl Flora that night. Then when she got hurt, I came to tell somebody."

Then I told him all the things that had happened.

"No," he said, when I asked him, at the end, "nobody told me the girl was hurt. They said she'd gone to her aunt, over on the North Side."

"Then you'll go and see her?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered. "That is—yes, I'll go."

He spoke like that, just as if he wasn't very sure, but wanted to make me think he was. But I'd said all I could and I had to hurry back. So I just said I must go and he let me out a side door and I walked back to the store, thinking I wouldn't want to have him for a father.

Well, out on the wagon that day I told Rick some more, and we talked quite a while, till at last he asked me why I didn't come with him again Wednesday night, when there was going to be another choir-practice, and I could look at that house where the blind man was again. So I said maybe I would. Then I happened to think perhaps if I'd stay with Rick one night,

we could get away from the organ-player and go and see what that house looked like before we went home. Rick lived nearer the church than I did, a good deal, and so I wouldn't have to be so late getting home that anybody would think about it.

I didn't say anything just at first, because I wanted to think. And after a while I thought how much better it would be to have two nights to look than just one, because we might not see anything the first night; so when we got back to the store I spoke to Rick about it, and he was very glad, and said he knew his mother would like to have me. So I said I would ask my mother that night if I could go, and we would get a chance to watch Tuesday and Wednesday nights.

That afternoon, though, another queer thing came to mix me all up about what to think. We drove out on our trip, not very far from the hospital, and I thought I would take just a minute to run in and see the little girl. So

I did. That is, I went over to the hospital door and asked the clerk I'd seen there before if I could go up and see Flora.

"No," he said. "I guess you can't—because she isn't here any more."

"Not here!" I said, and I was surprised as could be.

"No," he said. "She's gone."

"Where?" I asked.

"Nobody knows."

"Why, did she run away?"

"Hardly," he answered, "nor walk either. Somebody sent a cab for her."

"They did? Who?"

"Nobody here knows."

"Didn't anybody come for her?"

"Nobody but the cabman."

"Not her father?"

"No. Maybe it was he who telephoned."

"Telephoned?"

"Yes, this morning. A man telephoned and asked if the girl could be removed, and we told

him yes, so he said he'd send a cab, and he did, with a note to the girl. And she insisted on going right away, and didn't leave any address. Do you know where she lives?"

"I don't know sure," I answered. And then I started away.

I was glad to think that Flora's father had probably sent for her and that he was taking care of her now all right. And, of course, it must be that she was better of her hurt, or she couldn't have gone away alone in a cab as she had.

But when I got back to the store a greater surprise was there for me. Mr. Midgley was there, and so was Midgy, his boy, and they were talking with Mr. Farley. I thought, at first, that probably Mr. Midgley was trying to get Fred, as he called him, a place again in the store, but, just as soon as I came in, Mr. Farley called me over and I found it wasn't that at all but something surprising.

"This man here says you know where his

little girl was taken after your runaway, Whitehead?" Mr. Farley said. "Where is she?"

"Why!" I said, astonished, for I'd told Mr. Midgley. "She was taken to Mercy Hospital."

"She ain't there now," said Mr. Midgley.

I could only just look at him, I was so surprised. I'd supposed, of course, he had sent for her and knew all about her. But I could see that he didn't know, for he looked so much worried.

"But you sent for her, didn't you?" I asked, after a minute.

"No."

"Not a cab—this morning?"

"No."

"Didn't you telephone?"

"No—no, nothing. I went up there early this afternoon, and they told me she was gone. I have no idea where she is!"

"Why!" I said, "so did I go up there. They told me you'd sent for her with a cab and that she went away. Didn't they tell you so?"

"No. A nurse simply said her friends had taken her away."

"Didn't you tell them you are her father?" Mr. Farley asked.

"No," Mr. Midgley said.

"Why not?"

But Mr. Midgley didn't answer that. He turned away and looked around as if he didn't know what to do, and then he started slowly away, and Midgy went with him. I watched him a minute, and then I went after him to the stairs.

"You do know where she is, don't you?" I asked.

"No," he said, turning so quickly that I was scared. "But I *do* know who's got her. I'll hunt for her now, and when I find her they'll suffer for this. They thought I was easy and that they could land me, but they can't. They've gone too far, trying to get my boy and girl into it."

He was angry and excited, and I suppose he said more than he meant to. I looked at

Midgy for almost the first time, and he put his head down and his face got red as could be. And then so many thoughts came into my mind at once that I hardly knew which might be the right one. But the one that stayed there was that Midgy himself was mixed up in some of the things that gang of robbers had been doing, and if he was, maybe he knew more about the store robbery than anyone else. Probably I showed in my face what I was thinking, too, for when he raised his head again, sort of daring, he looked just once in my eyes and then away again, flushing more than ever.

But his father didn't see him, and when I looked up at Mr. Midgley his eyes were all full of tears. I never saw a man cry before, and of course he wasn't really crying, for the tears just came and stood in his eyes and didn't roll out at all. He just turned and walked up the stairs, slow and quiet.

I started to follow him, for if he didn't know where Flora was now, I thought I ought to ask

him if the blind man had anything to do with the man who had tried to get him into trouble, and, if he did, I should tell him what I knew of the blind man and where I had seen him. But I'd hardly started when I thought that I was just taking things for granted and that it might be wrong to tell him, for all I really knew was that the blind man wasn't blind. I didn't know that there was any connection between him and the men of the curiosity-store. And if there was, I didn't know that Mr. Midgley himself, or maybe Fred, wouldn't warn Moss or some of the others if they knew that I knew so much. So I sort of hesitated what to do, and while I waited, they got into the crowd and were gone.

Then I was sorry, for I remembered how anxious and sorry Mr. Midgley looked, and how much worse he must feel than he showed. And I felt terribly about the little girl who must be in the hands of those men,—Moss and the others. And so I ran up the stairs and tried to find Midgy and his father. But, though I looked

and looked, I couldn't. Then I knew I had been foolish to be so very suspicious, just when I ought to have told all I knew to help.

I went home feeling pretty badly that night, after the store closed, because I didn't know how to find Mr. Midgley and let him know, and because now the little girl would have to be with those men all night anyway before her father would know how to begin to look for her. But it all made me more anxious than ever to go home with Rick and get another chance to watch the house where the blind man had been.

I had told Rick that if I could come I would meet him at the door of the church where he sang, at half-past seven, and then we could look around. So when mother said I might go, after I told her Rick and I were getting up a scheme together that we wanted to talk about, I started off, and at half-past seven I was at the church.

But Rick didn't get there on time, and I thought, while I was waiting, I would just go around in the other street, back of the church,

and see what the front of the houses there looked like. So I did. It wasn't very dark at that time, but it was getting darker all the time, so I thought I could walk around without anybody's noticing me.

I left the church and walked down through the side street and past the alley. I thought first I would go into the alley and see just which door it was the blind man had entered. Then I was afraid if Moss should happen to come while I was there, he would know me and would be warned, even if he didn't do anything to me. I knew I didn't want to see him anywhere alone, too, because I was pretty sure he would do almost anything if he was angry or afraid of being caught.

So I went on, and when I got out in front of the houses that backed on the alley, I picked out one that I was sure must be the house Moss had gone into. It was a gray old place that hadn't been painted for a long time, and all the windows had blinds, and all the blinds were

closed. It made me shiver to look at it, because you could just think how dark it must be inside and wonder what kind of things the men did in there and how hard they would fight to keep people out.

But next door, at the right, was a vacant house with a "To Rent" sign in the window, and, while I was watching, I thought it would be a good plan to go over and go into that house—for I could see a window open in the porch—and look out of the windows on the side toward the thieves' house. Maybe that way I could see more, for perhaps a blind in the house of the robbers might be open on that side.

I thought about it a minute or two, and was rather excited about it, but pretty soon I decided to try it, for maybe I'd have more to tell Rick then. So I crossed over carefully, when nobody was in sight, crept up the steps, and climbed into that open window.

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNCONSCIOUS JAILER

I DIDN'T seem to feel that there was anything to be afraid of in going into that empty house until after I was in. But, just as soon as I was inside, where it was perfectly quiet and pretty dark, I began to think about all kinds of things that made me afraid, and I got so nervous I could hardly walk across the floor. I listened and I thought I could hear funny noises, as if someone was creeping softly around in the other rooms. There were little crackings and snappings of the floor, and the wind that I hadn't noticed outside sounded just as if it was feeling and feeling around, like anybody does in the dark.

The room I was in was a big one and seemed to be quite bare. There wasn't any carpet, and, so far as I could tell, no furniture at all. Of

course, it would have surprised me to find anything like chairs or curtains, when the rent sign was in the window, but I thought about it, because of the noises I kept hearing. But, after a little, I got used to the dark and the quiet, and then it didn't bother me so much. At least, I wouldn't let it, for I thought it wasn't very brave for me to be afraid of queer noises in just an empty house. So I started to find my way around.

It was so dark by that time that I could hardly see, but I made out a door that led into a hallway, and I went out there. Then I looked into two or three rooms that were bare and quiet, like the first one, and which smelled dusty, like a hay-barn. And then, at last, I found the stairs, and thought I would climb up. I hadn't made much noise, for it seemed as if I'd better just creep around quiet, for fear someone in the next house might notice a person in the vacant one.

Upstairs it was a little lighter, and I went to the windows in a big front room and looked out

into the street. Everything was quiet. Then I went to the side room that was next back and found a window looking out toward the next house. And I found that it was just as I'd thought it might be—there was a window without blinds in the gray house, just opposite the one I looked out of.

I got down on the floor when I saw that I was opposite the gray house window, because I was afraid if I stood up somebody would see me by the light that came in from outside. And I just looked over the window-sill and tried to see what I could of the inside of that place. The window seemed to open into a hall that was long and narrow and ran away back farther than I could see. There was a lamp not very far from the window, but it didn't burn very brightly, and showed only just a dark kind of carpet on the floor and part of the walls, which were white.

Everything was quiet over in there, too, and nobody seemed to be moving about, and, after I'd

watched quite a while, I thought I ought not to stay any longer, but should go and meet Rick and bring him back with me. So I got up and started to go out, when I noticed a door leading back into another room, behind the one I was in, and, as it stood open, I thought I'd just peep in there, too, because there might be another window there from which we could see more. But it was so dark in there I couldn't see anything except the faintest line of light over at the left, where I knew a window must be, with blinds or shades almost covering it.

I made up my mind to cross the room and have one look before I went out, and, as I thought that room was empty, just like the others had been, I started quickly to go to the window. But, all at once, I ran square into something in the middle of the floor, and it was just high enough to strike me in the stomach, and I guess I knocked all my breath out. It hurt awfully, and I felt just like you do when you fall out of a swing and strike flat. I couldn't

breathe at all. I just got right down on the floor, and I thought maybe I'd die then, because I gasped and gasped and couldn't get any breath at all, and it seemed as if I never could again.

But, after a while, I got a little air and then a little more, and then all at once I could breathe again, and I just lay and breathed and breathed and felt so good that I didn't want to move. Still, I was pretty sick when I did move and my stomach hurt pretty badly. But, at last, I reached up and felt around to find out what it was I had run into, and what do you think? It almost made me stop breathing again. It was a bed.

Right in the middle of the room it was—that is, the foot end of it, and the head was against the wall near the window. And it was not a bare bed at all, but was all fixed with a mattress and clothes and things, and pillows. At first I was scared for fear somebody might be in it, but all the clothes were mussed up and pulled back, so I knew there couldn't be, and

when I got where I could look across it towards the window, I could see enough of the pillows to know that nobody's head was on them.

But I was frightened just the same, too, for I could see, of course, that somebody must live here, or, at least, stay here some nights. So I thought I must get out quickly, and I turned to go back the way I came when, all at once, I heard a noise, plain as could be, downstairs. I didn't know what it was at first, but pretty quick I understood, for I heard a door at the back of the house open and shut and heard somebody lock it, and then somebody, or rather two people —for I could hear two different persons step,— walked forward through the back rooms into the front part.

If I'd been afraid before, I was twice as much so now, for I knew in a second that I was caught in that house by the people who must stay there; and I knew that I couldn't get out as long as they stayed in the front of the house. Of course, too, I was sure that they would be almost cer-

tain to come upstairs soon, because there was the only place where a bed or anything was. So I didn't know what to do, only stand still and wait and listen and try to make out from the noises just what they were doing. It's pretty hard, too, to do that. You know how excited you get when you are just playing hide-and-go-seek, to have the one who stands come very close to where you are hiding? Well, that's how I felt, only worse, for I couldn't make myself safe by running to touch any goal, and, if I got caught, it would be something worse for me than just having to be "it" next game.

But they didn't make me wait very long, for, after they stopped a minute or two in the front of the house, they commenced to come up the stairs. The steps creaked and made a great noise, and pretty quick I could hear their voices —deep voices of men—and knew that they were on their way to where I was. So, of course, I had to do something pretty quick, and I turned to see if there was another door that might lead

further back in the house or around into the hall. I didn't dare go back towards the front, for I didn't know which way they would come—through the rooms, as I had, or through the hall. My only way was to get out into a back room, and then maybe I could find a back stairs or some way of getting out, which would let me get away from them.

There was a door right across the room from the one I had come into, just before I ran into the bed. I could see a little better now, and I could tell that a door was there, because the top of it stood up into the white ceiling, above where the dark wall-paper came. So I went across to that, quickly as I could, and felt for the knob. But when I found and turned it, the door didn't open, because it was locked tight and fast and no key was in the lock.

Well, then I was in a pickle, for there didn't seem to be any way for me to escape. I knew the window was too high up to jump from even if I had had time to get it and the blinds

open. There was just one thing to do, and that seemed like such a foolish thing that it couldn't possibly be any use. And yet, I knew I would rather do that than be caught. So I got down on the floor quickly and crawled under the bed and up against the wall at the head as far as I could. And I'd only just got there and in a place where I could lie still, when they reached the top of the stairs.

But I seemed to be in a pretty bad place then, too, for I found a lot of queer things under the bed, which took up most of the space there and didn't leave me any more than enough room to lie in. There were packages, wrapped up in some kind of cloths and all pushed in together there under the bed. I felt of some of them a little, for, even if I was frightened, I wondered what they could be. It seemed very curious to me that all this stuff should be there, besides the bed, in a house that had a "To Rent" sign, and which seemed to have been standing empty a long time.

But the men came right along from the top of the stairs. They stopped at the door of the front room a second, as if they looked in, and then they came to the room next to the one I was in and looked in there. Then I began to hear them talking, so that I could tell what they said.

"The place is quiet enough," one of them said. "It's a good enough place for me."

"It looks like your kind of a place, Morse," the other man said, and I just shivered, all at once, for I remembered that second man's voice, and when he called the other one Morse I remembered that Mr. Benson the policeman had said that was the name of the leader of the robbers. So I began to know right then that I had gotten into the very house these men stayed in and that these two were part of the gang. And the other man, whose voice I knew, was the young man of the dark face I had seen in the curiosity-store.

There was a little while that I didn't seem

to know just what they said, when I was thinking about this. I got so confused and scared to think I was in there, and it seemed such a very bad place to be that I couldn't listen, I guess. But pretty soon I know they began to say things that made me think and listen.

"How long has this place been vacant, Morse?" the young man asked him.

"A year anyway," the other man answered.

"And how long have you been using it?"

"About three weeks."

"Isn't somebody likely to get wise?"

"No," Morse said, "I never come by daylight, and nobody else ever comes here."

"But how about the owner or the agent of the place?"

"I'm the owner," Morse said.

That seemed queer to me. If he was the owner, then why didn't he furnish the house up in good shape so he could live in it? But the young man asked that question just while I was thinking about it.

"Because I want people to think it is vacant," Morse answered him.

"How'd you ever come to own it?" asked the young man.

"I guess that's not any of your business, is it?" answered Morse.

Well, while they talked one of them had lighted up a light of some kind, that must have been in that room, after he had closed the doors and the curtains of the windows tight. I could tell that by the sounds, and the light from the lamp fell across the floor into my room. But when everything was fixed right, one of the men —Morse, I thought probably, because it was his place—walked right up to my door and came into the room where I was. I could feel the boards shake under his feet, and I hugged down against the wall and shut my eyes and just shivered again.

But he only came in after a chair, which he got out of a corner, and an old box that stood near the door, and he carried them out into the

other room, so I knew they were going to sit down and talk. And they did.

"Now, Boyce," Morse said, as he went out into the other room again, "you're to help in this thing. Benedict will be here pretty soon and bring our man and I want you to help us persuade him. He's an obstinate duffer."

"What are you going to do?" asked Boyce, for that seemed to be his name.

"We'll see, when Benedict comes."

I remembered that Benedict was the name Mr. Midgley had said belonged to the old man with the beard I had seen at the curiosity-store, so, of course, if he was coming there and the young man Boyce was there, then there must be a connection between them and the blind man Moss, who had come there the night I watched from the church. And if they were all in the same gang under this leader Morse, then probably they all had something to do with the store robbery, and maybe Midgley had, too. But while I was thinking about that, I thought, all at once, that

the name of the blind man Moss was quite a good deal like the name of this leader Morse, and I began to wonder, all at once, if he might not be the same man. And then I began to listen to his voice, too, for I hadn't recognized it before, and just in a second I knew that I was right about it, for it was the blind man's voice sure. It seemed funny afterwards that I hadn't known it just as soon as I knew the young man's, but that's the way it is sometimes. You don't understand things you ought to know so quickly as you do things you wouldn't expect to. But the blind man had probably told me his name was Moss just to fool me.

All this time I was pretty scared, too, that's sure. But there wasn't anything I could do but keep still and listen, for I wouldn't dare let them know I was there, though I was pretty sure they would find me. So I just tried to hear all I could.

"Now, this is how it is," Morse said, when they were both sitting in the other room. "This

fellow knows too much and we've got to shut his mouth."

"Sure," said Boyce.

Morse waited a minute, and I heard him strike a match, and pretty soon I could smell cigar smoke in my room, for it blew right in there.

"Well," he went on, then, "the easiest way is to make him mix up with us in something that he won't dare to tell about."

"Of course."

"Then he won't dare tell on us."

"No, but I thought he was already in with you," said Boyce.

"He was mixed up with one affair and is afraid as death of being caught."

"You said you had somebody to help at the store."

"Oh, yes, but that was the boy. He helped me, but he didn't fully know what he was doing, I guess. He isn't overly bright."

"Well, if you've got the boy in it, isn't that enough? That ought to hold the father."

"Yes. I guess it will help. Midgley thinks a lot of his children all right."

I had guessed that they were talking about Mr. Midgley before Morse said his name, and, of course, this made a good many thoughts come to me. Midgy had been helping Morse, was what had really been said, but Midgy hadn't really known it. I didn't see how that could be, but that was what Morse thought. Perhaps Morse had played the trick on him that he had tried to play on me, for I knew now that he must have been trying to get me into doing something that would help them when he wanted me to come again and talk to him about catching the thieves. Then I remembered how Midgy had blushed when I had seen him the last time, and I thought perhaps he hadn't been quite as innocent as Morse said.

But this meant, then, that they were going to bring Mr. Midgley there to that house that night and try to make him join them, and when I understood that I was so stirred up that I could

hardly keep still. It was hard to keep still anyway, you may be pretty sure, because the floor where I was lying was a mighty hard floor, and you can't lie in any position very long without getting all cramped up anyway. I moved sometimes, just a little, little bit, while they were talking, because I couldn't stand it not to stir at all.

I had listened quite a while and heard quite a lot of things about Mr. Midgley, though most of them were things I knew, before I commenced to wonder about Flora and where she was and if she was in Morse's hands. They hadn't said a word about her, and I had hardly thought about her. But now it seemed that if this was the place the robbers lived in, maybe she might be around there somewhere, and maybe that was why they were going to bring her father there. They might try to make him join them so that he could get her again. And I remembered what he had said about doing things to them if he found they had been the ones who took her

away from the hospital, and I wondered if he would be brave enough to face them all in this place alone at night. It seemed as if it would be a very hard thing to do. I know I would have been scared almost to death, and father says almost anybody would.

But while I was thinking about this, I heard the men stop talking all at once, and they seemed to be listening, and then, pretty soon, I heard a noise downstairs at the back again, and, all at once, Morse said something I couldn't hear exactly and they turned down the light, and one of them—I thought it was probably Morse—went out into the hall and down the stairs very quietly.

I listened and listened, but couldn't hear much for quite a while, but then I heard him coming back again and somebody else was with him. And just as soon as they got upstairs, I knew that the man they called Benedict and Mr. Midgley had come. It made me feel a little better when I knew Mr. Midgley was there, for I sort of

thought he was not a bad man, even if he was mixed up with the robbers, and maybe, if they couldn't make him do as they wanted him to, he could help me, some way. I didn't know just how, but, anyway, if he was there, and they should find me, they wouldn't dare do anything very bad to me, because they would be afraid. I didn't know then how much they would dare to do.

Well, they all came into the room next to mine, and turned up the light again, and then they got some more boxes and things to sit on. From where I was I could see now, through the door, just the feet of two men, and their legs as high as their knees, and I kept watching them all the time while they talked, just the way you watch people's faces when you are standing up or sitting and talking with them.

It was very funny to hear how polite Morse was to Mr. Midgley.

"I'm very glad to see you again, Midgley," he said first, "and I know the rest of our friends

are, too. We haven't seen very much of you lately, and it seems good to have a chance."

He waited a minute, as if he wanted Mr. Midgley to say something, but he didn't seem to want to talk with them.

"We've invited you over here to have a talk with you to-night, Midgley," Morse went on after a while, "and we hope you'll be frank with us and tell us what's in your mind. I've sort of taken a fancy to you and I'd like to have a good friendly understanding with you."

Then Mr. Midgley answered, and he seemed mad, just as you'd think he would be.

"You can't have any understanding with me, Morse," he said, right up sharp. "You know why I came here. I didn't expect to see you—all of you here together—or I wouldn't have come. But now I'm here, I'm not going to have any more fooling about this. I'm not with you on this, and I won't stand for any of your talk about it. I was a fool once, but I won't be again, and I'm going to try to live to make up for it.

I came here to find out what you've done about my little girl. I'll agree to go away and keep still if you just tell me where she is, for, of course, you know."

"*I* know about your girl?" asked Morse. "Why, how can you think so?"

"I know it's some of this gang that got her away from the Mercy Hospital."

"Mercy Hospital? How'd she happen to be there?"

"Oh, I guess you know! Nobody but some of you ever took her away."

Morse didn't answer for a minute, and then he spoke slowly.

"Well," he said, "suppose it was so. What then?"

"I want her," said Mr. Midgley, angry, and I thought he was pretty brave to talk so straight to them, when they were all against him.

"Of course you do," said Morse. "I can understand how a father feels. Perhaps we can help you find her."

"You know you can, and I want you to begin now. As I said to you, I don't want anything else to do with you from now on. You came pretty near forcing me to join you, because I mixed up in one guilty deal with you, but I'm through with you now. All I want is to have you let my boy and girl alone. I suspect you've got my boy in deeper than I know, but I can take that out of him if you let him alone. Now, where is the girl?"

"Don't be in such a hurry with me, Midgley," Morse said. "We'd like to have you friendly with us. There's no reason why you shouldn't be."

"Isn't there? Well, there's reason enough for me. I've been a weak fool to let you do what you have with me already, and maybe I'd have been ten times bigger fool, too, if you hadn't tried to get my children mixed up in this. But now I see what I've been doing, and I and my children are going to get rid of such as you now, forever."

"Are you?" Morse asked, slowly and quietly. "Well, maybe you are."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say! Maybe you are and maybe you aren't. Folks don't mix up with Aaron Moss and then get away and tell all they know."

He called himself Moss just as he had to me, and then I thought probably that was just his way of saying his name. But Mr. Midgley went right on.

"Don't think you can scare me," he said. "You can't."

"Can't I?" asked Morse, and his voice began to get ugly now. "I'll tell you a couple of things, Midgley, and then, maybe you won't be so brash."

I didn't know what brash meant then, but father says it means bold—not exactly brave or daring, but sort of saucy-brave.

"Go ahead, tell me what you like. I've got some things to tell you, too."

"If you break with us, I'll put your girl where

you'll never see her again. If you tell of anything you know, your boy will suffer as much as any of us and I'll see that he does. Besides, I'll get you for it, on that old count, if I have to wait a hundred years."

Mr. Midgley seemed to be a little scared at that, but in a minute he said, "You can't hurt my boy, and if you don't give up my girl, I'll give you all up to the police to-night."

That sounded as if he was ready to fight them all right then, and I guess it frightened Morse, too, for he waited a minute before he went on. Then he talked slow again.

"Your girl is in a place nobody knows of but me," he said. "She's safe, and if I happen to forget where she is, neither you nor anybody else will ever find her till she starves, for she only gets fed when I feed her. As for the boy, I can prove to you that he's mixed up with some ugly things now. If you make trouble for me, he will go to jail as sure as you will, and you know what that means for a boy."

Mr. Midgley was quiet a long time then, and it seemed as if there wasn't much of anything he could do, for I was sure he did think a great deal of Flora and of Fred, too, and if terrible things were going to happen to them, he had to do something to save them. How I wished then that I could get away and get to Mr. Benson and tell him what they were doing and have them all arrested, then. But I didn't dare stir. If they caught me, they would do something to me, I knew, for they hadn't any way to make me promise not to tell, except to hurt me some way. At last, though, Mr. Midgley spoke up.

"I don't know why I should fear you," he said. "You say you can do so much, but there's a law in this country and there are people who are stronger than you are. I can get help. What do you suppose Alexander Fleming would give to get hold of you, now? He's offered a reward of two hundred dollars for information. You can just imagine how hard he will be after you when he gets it."

"Yes, I can imagine," said Morse. "But that wouldn't do you nor your girl nor your boy any good."

"My boy knows I was coming to talk to you to-night," said Midgley. "He knows enough to send you to prison, and I believe he knows where his sister is. He is not in your hands, and if anything happens to me he will tell the police."

"Oh, no, he won't," said Morse. "I told you I could prove to you that he's in with us."

"I don't believe it. Prove it!" cried Mr. Midgley.

Without a word Morse got up and walked straight into the room where I was. I held my breath, for it was so quick I hardly had time to understand. And he came right across to the side of the bed, and I could see his feet between me and the light, down towards the foot, and then, all at once, he knelt down beside the bed and commenced to feel around amongst the things there, and I felt so scared

I could have screamed, just as I'd felt before. It seemed every minute as if his fingers were going to touch me.

I tried not to make a single sound, and I shut my eyes, and just barely let my breath come in and go out, till I nearly choked, for he was so long about it I was sure he must hear me. But, all at once, the worst thing of all happened. He stopped fumbling a second, and got partly up, and then he stooped again and I heard a noise that made me jump and knock my head against the wall, and next second a match flared up in his hand and I saw his face, with the beard, and his little sharp eyes, without the goggles now, peering in under the bed, and all the face was red with the light the match made on it. And his eyes looked right straight over where I was.

CHAPTER IX

AT THE CRACK IN THE DOOR

I THINK I wasn't so much frightened just in the minute that I was looking straight into the eyes of Moss or Morse, the man I had thought was blind, as I was before. I guess when things really come after you have been afraid of them for a long time, you are not always so much scared as you think you will be. But it seemed as if he must be seeing me, and I thought I could see him stop suddenly in the search he was making and see his eyes open in surprise.

But in just a minute, as soon as the match flared up and got to burning well, he commenced to search again, pushing things about with his hands, and, at last, just before his match went out, he found something, and drew it out. Then he got up, blew out his match, and went back into the other room, and I knew he hadn't seen

me at all, and I found, all of a sudden, that I was all wet with perspiration. So I must have been more scared than I thought I was.

But I couldn't see just what Morse and the others were going to gain by proving that Midgy was mixed up in the robberies, for it seemed to me that the more they troubled Mr. Midgley about his children, the more angry he got and the more it seemed that he would not join them. So I thought maybe things would end between them pretty quickly, and I was right, only they didn't end at all as I thought they would.

Morse went out into the other room and stood in the light, right in front of the door, and by moving just a little bit, I could see almost the whole of him, except his head, from where I was under the bed. Then he called Mr. Midgley over to him to look at something he held in his hands. When Mr. Midgley came up close the other men came, too, and they all stood around as if they were very much interested. I couldn't see what it was Morse was holding, but it doesn't

matter at all, for I found out pretty quickly that it didn't have anything to do with Midgy or his father.

Everything got very quiet all at once when they were all close together, while Morse moved his hands a little, and then, all at once, he swung his arm right around Mr. Midgley's neck, and almost before you could breathe all of the three had grabbed hold of him and they were fighting and struggling and striking, with Mr. Midgley in the middle. And everything was so quiet—no one hollering, and not much noise on the floor—that it seemed almost like just looking at moving pictures instead of a real fight.

But it only lasted a second or two. I don't know why Mr. Midgley didn't call out to anyone while he had a chance, for if he had he might have been heard on the street. But he didn't, and pretty quickly they all went down to the floor together with just one heavy thump, and next minute they had stuffed a cloth in Mr. Midgley's mouth and had tied his hands and feet with

a cord somebody found mighty convenient, and he couldn't speak or move anything but his elbows and knees.

Then Morse and the others got up and stood around. I'd hardly looked at the others till then, but now I moved a little further out and I could see their faces, and they were the old man with the beard—only, somehow, he didn't look as old now—and the young man with the dark face, just the ones I had seen at the curiosity store.

"What shall we do with him?" asked Benedict.

"Drop him in the ash-can outside," the young man said, rubbing his face where it had been bruised in the scuffle.

"No," said Morse. "This is a good place for him right here till he changes his mind."

You wouldn't think he'd really mean that, but he did, and what they did then was to get some more rope from a closet and bind him fast, so he couldn't stir at all, and then they sat down and talked just as quietly as if he wasn't there at

all and as if nothing very much had happened. They seemed to think it would be necessary to move away from this house, and, at first, I didn't understand just why. But, after they'd talked quite a while, I found out that they had another reason than being afraid of the police, for Morse told them that all the plunder that had been taken from Fleming's was in the house then and that it must be carried somewhere to be disposed of.

I was pretty much startled to hear them talk right out about Fleming's and the robbery there, though I was sure by that time that they had been the thieves. But they didn't seem to care at all, among themselves or for Mr. Midgley, who could hear of course, though he was bound fast. And I found out pretty soon that that wasn't the only burglary they had committed, but that they had robbed other places and they talked about them, too. They seemed to have been a long time in the same gang together, and yet the young man and Benedict seemed to know very little about Morse's way of living or what

he did when he was away from them. That seemed queer, but I could see that they had very little to say about what should be done and that Morse just bossed everything without caring what they thought.

Well, after they had talked a long time, Benedict and Boyce finally said they were going, and it was decided to meet the next evening there at the house, and before I could understand all it meant, they had said good-night and gone and I was alone in the house with Morse, and with Mr. Midgley lying bound and gagged, as they call it, on the floor. And what was worse, I could see now that Morse expected to spend the night there. Probably it is funny that I had never thought of that before, in spite of the bed being there, and all; but now I understood. I was a prisoner, just as much as if he knew I was there, and, by the way they had treated Mr. Midgley, I couldn't expect anything when I was found, but that they would do as much or worse to me.

But to think that I had to lie there under that

bed all night long just seemed to me like thinking of dying. I had been there so long then without moving more than my head, a little at a time, that I was aching all over, and the idea that I couldn't get up from that floor till morning seemed pretty bad. I think it made me partly forget that I was in such a dangerous place. But, all at once, I thought of something that made me get cold all over. I thought maybe Morse wouldn't go out of the house again till the next night, and if he didn't, then how could I stay where I was all that time? Besides, I was pretty sure now that the things all around me, under the bed, were stolen things—maybe the things that were taken from Fleming's; and if they were, of course they would be taken out to be moved that night, and I would be found sure.

I couldn't guess what the thieves would do when they found me, but pretty soon I began to wonder what my father and all the other people I knew would do when they missed me. And then I began to feel better, because I thought

that, as soon as I was missed, people would commence looking for me, and then Rick would tell them all he knew, and they would come and search the house of the thieves. But, all at once, while I was thinking this I remembered that Rick didn't know which house was the house of the thieves, and, if he did—why, he wouldn't know I was there, for I had only told him I'd come to stay with him if I could, and he wouldn't even know I had come. He would wait until he got tired, at the church, and then go home, thinking I couldn't come. Then, in the morning he would think probably I was sick, because I wouldn't be at the store—and then, oh! I got awfully scared, because I remembered that father and mother would think I was staying at Rick's house and wouldn't even know I was lost, for two days, or maybe longer.

I can't tell you how that made me feel. I guess I felt the worst then of any time at all in this story, except once, which I have to tell you about later. I thought I was not going to

be able ever to get away from that place. I couldn't do anything but lie still under that bed as long as Morse stayed in the house. If he stayed all next day I might not be able even to lie still, because it was getting so hard for me now. And then, if I didn't get anything to eat for such a long time, maybe I would starve. I thought this last thing might be so, because I didn't know then how long it might take a boy to starve to death. Father says, though, that you couldn't starve in one day, so I needn't have been so worried about that. But I had enough things to be worried about anyway.

Well, I worried and worried, but what do you think? All of a sudden it seemed as if I didn't know just what had happened, for I found that I was opening my eyes and had been asleep, and instead of lamp-light coming into the door from the other room, where Mr. Midgley lay bound on the floor, daylight was just squeezing in through the shutters of the window in my room.

It's mighty surprising to find that you've been

asleep all night and that morning has come when you don't remember getting sleepy at all and when you hadn't even thought of such a thing. You wake up and find it very hard at first to think where you are or what is happening to you, and it is very queer. And then, when you know it is so, that you have been asleep, it makes you feel that you don't know much about what is likely to happen to you any time, and that you can't always be sure that you can do just what you expect to do.

Well, it hardly seemed as if it could be so that I had gone to sleep so suddenly and slept so soundly all night, but I knew it was morning and I knew where I was, and then I found out that I couldn't move my right arm at all and that it didn't have any feeling in it, except a queer sort of an itching feeling away inside where I couldn't rub it. I didn't know, at first, but pretty soon I found out that my arm was asleep. Father says it was numb, from my lying on it probably, but that means the same thing.

I almost hollered when I turned a little, because my back hurt me and my neck and my leg; and it seemed as if I was breaking in two all over.

Then I remembered, suddenly, that probably Morse was, right at that minute, in the bed above me, maybe asleep and maybe not, and I just held my breath. And, while I was still, I heard two things—one was a noise downstairs, like somebody moving about there, and the other was somebody moving in the room on the other side of mine from the one where the men met the night before—the room that I had found was locked when I tried the door.

It made me wide awake, right away, trying to think, and pretty soon I thought I could understand it. I thought probably Morse had put Mr. Midgley in the locked-up room after I went to sleep and that he himself might be downstairs now. Still I didn't dare move around, for maybe the noise downstairs might be some of the other men coming in for something, and Morse might be still in the bed. But, in a minute or two, I

heard the person downstairs coming up, and before long he came through the outer room and into mine with a light, and I knew by the way he walked and by his feet that it was Morse. And he went straight across to the locked room, and I heard him put a key in the door and unlock it and open it. Right away afterwards I heard him speak in a low voice to the person in there and he said something about breakfast, but the other person did not answer.

Then Morse came out and locked the door again. Then he moved around the room in a way I couldn't understand, till pretty soon I heard noises that made me know he was eating, and, at last, I saw him set a basket, like a big lunch basket, on the floor near the outer door. Right away after that he went out, leaving his light, and I heard him go downstairs again. But he didn't leave the house.

Well, I thought and thought then, trying to figure out what I was going to do. I really felt a little better than I had the night before, because

I was rested a little, I suppose. Then I found my arm was getting awake and my back stopped hurting, and pretty soon I thought about being very hungry indeed. It was really quite a while before I thought of such a thing as that there might be some more things to eat in that lunch basket, and that I might perhaps get some of them. I thought it would surely be all right for me to get them if I could, and then I began to feel that it would be funny if I should get part of the lunch that Morse meant to eat later. Of course, I hadn't got over being scared, because I knew that I hadn't very much chance to get away. But I didn't seem so much afraid as I had been—perhaps I was getting used to it, or perhaps it was because you are never as afraid of things in the morning as at night. Anyway, after a long while, when I could hear Morse working and working away at something downstairs, I got so hungry just from thinking about that basket, and looking at it, that I had to go and look into it.

So that was what I did, at last. Just as carefully as I could I moved out from under that bed and crawled away till I could stand up. I was so stiff I could hardly do it at all. You wouldn't scarcely believe anyone could get so stiff just lying still. And when I got up on my feet, I nearly fell over, because I was trying so hard not to make a noise and because I seemed to find it very hard to balance myself. Then, when I got so I could hold myself easier and found that I wouldn't need to make much more noise—or it didn't seem like much—I went across at last to the place where the basket was, and I opened it.

You'd have thought Morse must be a very hearty eater if you could have seen that basket. I knew that he planned to leave the house that night, and, of course, if he did he wouldn't need to live on lunch put up the way that was. But the basket was almost full of sandwiches—they were awfully good, too—with some oranges and some bananas and some cold boiled eggs and

some pickles—just like a picnic. It seemed to me, just as soon as I had smelled them, that I hadn't had anything to eat for at least a week, and I just took as many sandwiches as I could carry in one hand and two boiled eggs and an orange in the other, and then instead of going back and getting under the bed again, I thought I could stand behind the door out of the dim lamp-light till I could eat what I had and that I could depend on hearing Morse if he should start to come.

Well, I was so hungry that I ate a sandwich and the orange and an egg very quickly, and it was so good that it was quite a while before I noticed that the noise Morse had been making downstairs had stopped. But, all of a sudden, I thought about it and stopped eating to listen, and my heart commenced to beat hard without my knowing why. I almost choked on that sandwich I had, because I was scared so that I nearly breathed a crumb into my throat.

I couldn't understand it at all, but I knew

pretty soon that I was afraid someone was very close to me—maybe watching me. I turned my head around slowly and looked everywhere, and I listened and listened. There wasn't a single sound anywhere. It was as still as it is always just after it has been raining hard at night and stops suddenly after it has waked you up to lie and listen.

But I didn't dare stir, even if I couldn't see or hear anything. I was sure that if Morse had gone out of the house I would have heard him, but somehow I didn't feel so sure that he might not be coming up the stairs then, without a noise. Perhaps he had heard me. And just as I thought that, suddenly I almost screamed right out, for, all at once, right at the crack in the door through which I was looking into the other room, just then, something moved, as still as a cat after a bird. And, in a second I could see that a man had come into the doorway, not making a single sound, and I could see his gray, curly hair and part of his ear and

his shoulder, and two of his fingers, where they lay across the crack.

That was when I felt most frightened of any time at all, for he had come so suddenly and so quietly, just when I was feeling so safe. Of course, I knew it was Morse, even if the room wasn't very light. And he stood still on the threshold long enough for me to know. I don't know what I would have done either if he had stood still any longer, because it seemed as if he never was going to move again.

But he did move at last. He started very slowly forward, and sort of half-crouching down he tiptoed into the room, and I knew then that he had taken off his shoes, for you couldn't hear him step. I expected every second that he would look around, and then come and look behind the door, for I never guessed what he was thinking, but pretty soon I saw that he was watching the locked door and that nothing else interested him at all. And I knew then, surely, that he didn't yet suspect anyone was there but Mr. Midgley.

He was very, very slow getting across the room, but at last he was at the door, and he bent his head, listening. I simply couldn't help watching him past the edge of my door then, even if it was dangerous, because I couldn't stand it when I knew he was there and everything was so quiet. So I did look. He had his back towards me and was standing with his ear right against the door, and there he stood still again for ever so long.

When he moved once more I held myself back behind the door again, as far as I could, and kept still, but he certainly wasn't satisfied, for he didn't move, and after a while I had to peek again, and there he stood in the middle of the floor—with his head in a funny position, like a robin, when it listens, as they say, to hear a worm crawl in the ground—and he seemed to be sniffing and sniffing as if he smelled something very queer. And then, all at once, he turned and nearly caught me looking at him.

At first I thought he really had caught me, for

he came right straight over toward that side of the room, but next instant he had turned from the door and was opening the basket of lunch and looking down into it in a queer way, as if he knew somebody had been taking things out of it. And then I understood what a foolish thing I had done, for I knew he could smell some of the food very plainly in the room, and in a minute I knew it was the orange, for he began to take out the oranges and count them, and shake his head and whisper to himself and think.

But at last he closed the basket again and stood up, and then he walked straight across to the locked door, and taking out a key, he opened it and went in. Then I heard his voice, low and quiet, but sharp with a kind of snarly tone as he spoke aloud.

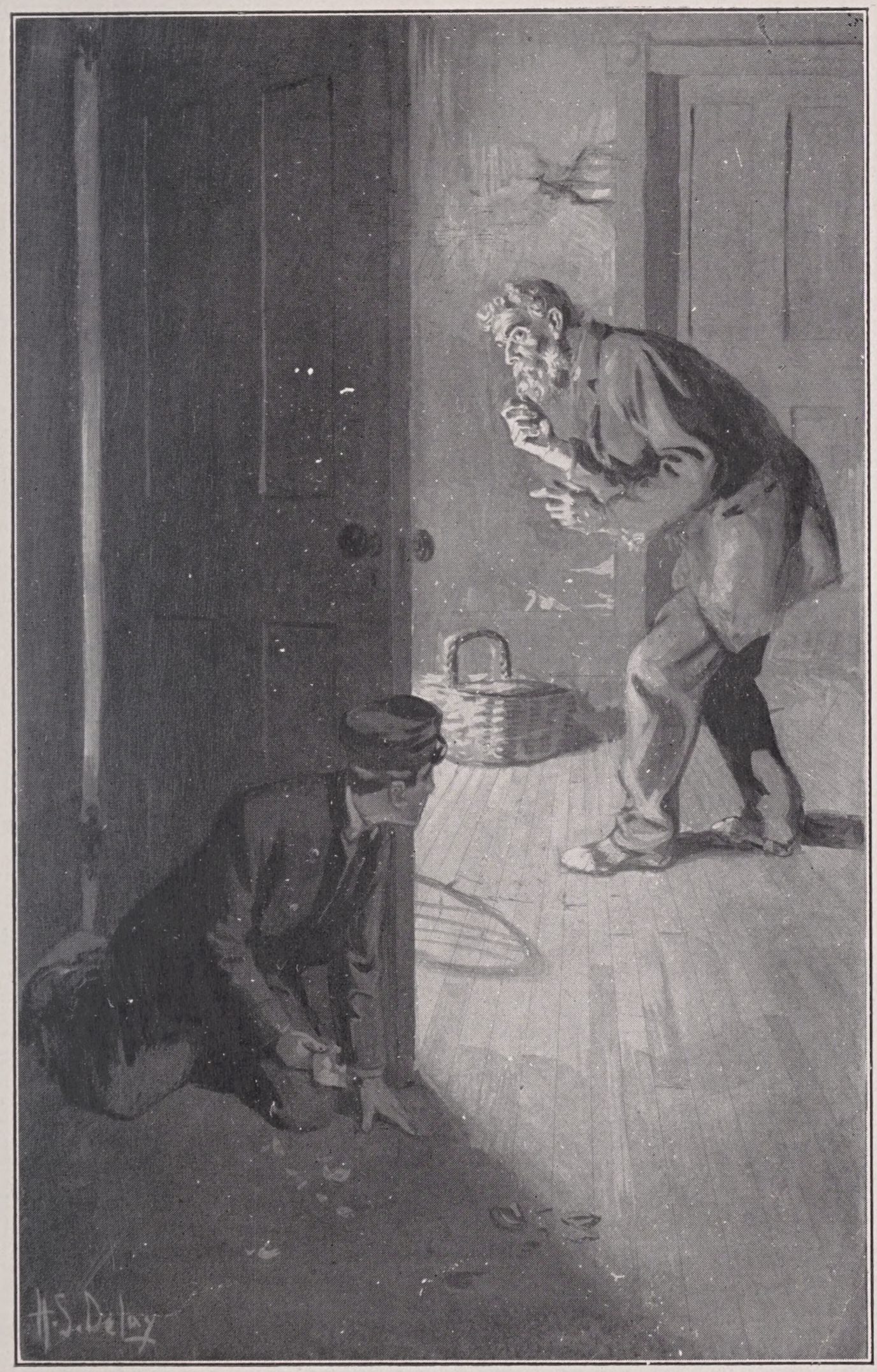
"What are you doing?" he asked somebody in there.

I couldn't hear any answer at all, and I guess there wasn't any, because he seemed to be madder when he asked the next question.

"I didn't give you an orange for breakfast; where did you get it?"

"I haven't had an orange," was what the person said, but it wasn't Mr. Midgley, nor any other man who said it. It was a girl's voice, and I knew, of course, instantly, that it must be Flora. But before I could think it all out, a thought came to me that this was my chance to get away, and I didn't stop to think that over. I just moved out as still and quickly as I could and just skipped on my toes out into the other room.

I wouldn't have stopped then, not a single second, if I could have helped it, but it was very dark and I had to move slowly, and just as I got out into the middle of that next room, I heard Flora suddenly make a little cry, as if she was hurt, and I waited to listen. Then I heard her again, and this time she made little moans and sounds, as if she was trying very hard to keep still, but yet unable to because he was hurting her.



AND THEN I UNDERSTOOD WHAT A FOOLISH THING I HAD DONE.

It made me almost wild, I was so angry, all at once, to think of that man hurting a little cripple-girl like that, and I turned around, thinking I would run back in there and try to do something. Then I stopped to try to think if it wouldn't be better for me to go on and get away and let Mr. Benson know where Morse was, and so get the police to come and save the little girl and her father and all. If I ran back into that room where they were, Morse would stop hurting Flora, but he would have us all prisoners then, and I would lose the only chance I would be likely to have to get away.

And just then Flora stopped crying out and I heard the door suddenly close and the key turn in it and I knew Morse was coming. I turned to run towards the door, and never thought anything might be in the way. I only wanted to get out of that room and down the stairs, and then I knew I could get away through some door or window. But, just as I was almost to the door,—for I could see it like a big, black shadow

on the wall,—my foot suddenly struck something. I tripped, tried terribly hard not to fall, but tripped again with my other foot over something big and soft and still, and next instant I came down on the floor with a jar that shook the whole house.

CHAPTER X

TWO KINDS OF REWARD

SOMETIMES when things happen to you, like that fall of mine, as I was trying to run away, you get just sort of stunned and you hardly know what you are doing; but, at other times, some way the accident doesn't seem to bother you very much, but just makes you do things as fast as you think of them, without hesitating or waiting for anything.

The very minute I fell there, in the house of the thieves, although I knew Morse was after me and would be there in about a second, the first thought that was in my mind was that maybe I could roll very softly on out into the hall and away from whatever it was I had fallen over, and then maybe Morse would fall over the same thing if he ran after me, and that would give me a chance to go on and get away. But when I

put my hand out to feel the way, for it was too dark then near the hall door to know really just where things were, I put it square on a person's face, and, of course, I didn't have to guess at all to know that it was Mr. Midgley still lying bound there on the floor.

I could hardly believe it, but as I went on and rolled over as I planned, I thought faster than I ever did, I guess, and the thing that seemed most important to me was just to get out of reach of the door and then to be quiet till I could find out what Morse meant to do. And that was the luckiest thing I ever did, for what do you think happened? Morse came running out of the bedroom and, before he'd got fairly into the room where Mr. Midgley was, he struck a match and held it up to see. If I hadn't rolled on, over and over, quiet as I could, till I was in the dark hallway and away one side of the door, he would have caught me sure. But I had, and I can hardly tell about it now without laughing, for Morse thought right away that it had been Mr.

Midgley who had made the noise trying to get away.

"Oh!" Morse said, sort of hoarse, but quietly, too. "So you've got some life in you yet, have you? I thought maybe you'd be kind of tired by this time."

He stopped and stood holding the match so he could see Midgley—at least, I suppose that was what he was doing, for I couldn't see him and could only see the light of the match grow and flicker. Then he went on.

"If you aren't quiet," he said, ugly, "I'll put you down in the cellar, so you see it won't do any good to make a fuss. I thought maybe you'd be ready to listen to reason by now, but it seems you aren't. I guess I'll let you have a couple more days of this before we feed you or talk to you."

I wondered what in the world Mr. Midgley could think had happened, but of course he couldn't answer a word on account of the gag. But just then the match went out and I heard

Morse turn around and go back into the bedroom, as if to get another one. So I knew that if I was ever going to get away, I'd have to go then.

I can hardly believe it all now as I am writing about it, for it seems as if a boy couldn't hardly have such an adventure, and when I told father about it, he could only just say "Well, well, well, who would have believed it?" over and over. I know if Dib or Rick had told me all these things, I'd have thought maybe something was the matter with them, and I know that now sometimes, when I think about it all, it seems as if I must have dreamed about it. But it did all happen, and, as father says, you can't ever tell what may happen to you or what you are likely to do when it does happen. So it isn't fair for anybody not to believe me until they know—and when they know they will have to believe, because it's all so.

Well, I was just feeling like you do when you play ring-goal or prisoner's base or gray-wolf,

or some of those games where you get very much excited and you do things very quick because you haven't any time to think of them. If you do the wrong things at such times, you get caught or something, but if you happen to do just the right thing, you surprise even yourself. That was how it was with me, about the rolling out into the hall and what I did afterwards. I happened to do the right thing. I thought that if I took off my shoes, I could walk as quietly as Morse had, and so I sat up and unbuttoned them quick and then I got up in my stocking feet, feeling hot all over, with my heart beating so fast I could hardly breathe, and, before Morse came back from the inner room, I had found the stairs and was almost half-way down them. Then, when Morse commenced to light more matches and to talk to Mr. Midgley again, I didn't wait to hear what they said, but just went on, quiet as I could—and I couldn't even hear myself—till I got down to the bottom, and then I went right into the front room and to the win-

dow where I had climbed in, at the very first, for I remembered it easily.

The shutters of the window were pulled close together now and hooked on the inside, but the window was still open, and I unhooked them softly and opened them, too. The light shone in my eyes pretty strong and made them ache, the way they do when you look at the water when the sun shines on it, or when somebody throws sunlight in your face with a piece of looking-glass. But I climbed out and pushed the blinds close again, and then sat down on the steps and put my shoes on quick, though I couldn't button them up because I hadn't any button-hook. Nobody at all was in the street and nobody saw me, I guess, and it was only a minute after that that I was away from the house and running down the street as hard as I could to the elevated railroad.

I had eighteen cents in my pocket, so I could pay my fare, and I went straight as I could to the police-station where they had taken Prall and

Midgy and me on the day of the runaway. On the way I noticed that my hand felt funny, and I looked and found it all covered with egg and bleeding from a cut between the fingers, which the shell had made. I wondered what Morse would think when he saw the egg and my last sandwich on the floor, for I remembered then that I hadn't eaten all the things I took out of the basket, but that I must have held them tight in my hands till I fell over Mr. Midgley.

Well, when I got to the station I didn't find Mr. Benson, but they told me he was off duty just then and only lived a little ways away, and so I went to his house and found him. And when I'd told him everything just as fast as I could, he did things quicker than you'd hardly think.

"You can take us to the place, can you, son?" he asked me, and that was the only question, and when I said yes he just grabbed me and we ran back to the station. They got out a patrol wagon and six men, and we drove away up the street as fast as the horses could run. I never rode in

a patrol wagon before, and it is exciting because it always seems as if you must run into people and wagons, but the gong always gets them out of the way in time.

When they got two blocks away from the robbers' house, they stopped, and then I told them all just where the place was and took Mr. Benson to the corner where we could see it. Then he told the men what to do, and they all separated and went different ways. Mr. Benson and one other man—the one who had talked to him about the robbery at the store—went together. But they made me stay with the man on the wagon, because they were afraid I might get hurt, and I felt disappointed about that, because I wanted to see.

It seemed a long, long time before anything happened, and I could hardly wait, in spite of the policeman on the wagon asking me lots and lots of questions about what I'd done and all. But at last we heard a signal whistle and we drove around to the nearest corner to the rob-

bers' house, and there was Mr. Benson and all the others, and they had Morse and Mr. Midgley and Flora all with them, and a great crowd of people had come around and were all asking each other what was the matter and lots of other questions.

But Mr. Benson didn't answer anybody, and he just had the wagon back up to the house and they brought out all the things that they found packed under Morse's bed and in other places and put them in, and then one man stayed to guard the place, while we drove away very quickly. I thought it was funny they didn't talk about catching the other men in the gang, and I spoke about it to the driver, but he just said Mr. Benson knew who they were and that they'd be caught all right. And they were, too, both Boyce and Benedict and one or two others I didn't know about, that night.

I sat in the seat with the driver going back, and I thought Flora didn't see me till we got to the station-house, but she told me afterwards

that she did. She looked very white and scared, and her father seemed to be sick, for he couldn't sit up. Mr. Benson said afterwards that it was being bound and gagged so long, and Mr. Midgley has told me now that he was faint as he could be for a long time after they let him loose and pretty lame for several days.

Morse hardly looked at me at all, and I guess he hadn't any idea that I had anything to do with the matter, till we got before the sergeant. Then, when I told my story there before them all, he looked at me all the time, till it got to be hard work to talk and till I had to look away and at Flora and to remember how mean and bad Morse had been to her and to her father before I could finish.

And then the only thing Morse said was, "So you're the one that stole the egg I found on the floor," just as if that was the only thing he was interested in.

I hardly know all that happened, for it all came very quickly after I got away from the rob-

bers' house. I talked with Mr. Benson and with the sergeant a long, long time, till I felt all sort of hollow inside. But when it was over, I guess I had told everything that I've written about here at least twice. I heard all about Morse, too, and how he disguised himself as a blind man because the police knew him and would have arrested him or driven him out of the city if they had recognized him. And he had been getting ready for the silver robbery when I first saw him near that basement window. And then Mr. Benson took Mr. Midgley and little Flora and me back over to the store to see Mr. Fleming. And Mr. Benson carried Flora in his arms, just as if she was his own little girl, while her father carried her crutches.

I don't believe I was ever so tired in my life. I guess we all were, and it was funny, but Mr. Fleming knew it just as soon as he saw us, and he made them bring us each a cup of coffee from the store restaurant before I commenced to tell him all the story. Then, when I felt better I

told him everything I could, and Mr. Benson told the rest, and Mr. Fleming just sat looking first at me and then at Mr. Benson and then at me again. And his eyes were just as bright as they could be and he seemed to be laughing and laughing away in back of them, though he didn't even smile outside.

And then, right in the middle of the talk, one of the strangest things of all happened. Somebody knocked at the office door and, even before it opened, I heard a voice outside that I knew and that surprised and startled me.

"I understand very well—I understand very well—I understand—yes, yes!" was what it sounded like. And then: "I want to see that boy. I know Mr. Fleming. I insist on seeing that boy. I insist on seeing him. I insist, I say. I've had the police after him for a week, and now I've found him."

But before I had more than time to think who that voice belonged to, the funny little man, Mr. Peter Holborn—who had first accused me of

beating the horses on the day of the runaway, and had been so sorry for it afterwards,—had come into the room and something was happening to make me forget how queer it was to see him there. The minute he stepped into the room, it seems to me, he looked first straight at Mr. Midgley and then stopped short and looked at no one else. And Mr. Midgley started up on his feet, as if he had never thought of being tired or sick, and they looked at each other as if each thought the other must be a ghost or something. And then, Mr. Midgley suddenly covered his face with his hands and just groaned out loud, and I knew it meant something terrible.

Everybody was perfectly quiet for a minute, and then Mr. Holborn just walked slowly straight across the office to Mr. Midgley.

"John Midgley," he said, "you here?" His voice wasn't loud then, but it was very hard and stern.

"It's me, Mr. Holborn!" exclaimed Mr. Midgley, suddenly throwing his hands out as if

he was begging for something, while his face was as white as if he hadn't any blood at all in his body.

And then, I can't tell just how they said it all, but it came out very quickly that Mr. Holborn had been the lawyer who had helped catch Mr. Midgley in a swindling scheme Morse had started—a scheme to cheat another man out of his money—several years before, and that Mr. Midgley had got away before he could be arrested and had never been caught. Before I could hardly understand, too, Mr. Midgley was telling them that it was by threatening to give him up to the police for punishment that Morse and his gang had kept him quiet about them and had almost made him join them. It seems they were afraid not to have him connected with them, because he knew so much about them and might some day give them up.

It seemed that Mr. Fleming knew Mr. Holborn very well, and both he and Mr. Benson remembered Mr. Midgley's case, so they didn't inter-

rupt. But when Mr. Holborn began to talk, to accuse Mr. Midgley and to say that "at last justice would be satisfied," and things like that, Mr. Midgley threw himself down across Mr. Fleming's table, and lay with his head on his arms, and Flora sobbed out loud. And I couldn't stand it. It seemed to me that this was so bad that nothing good which had happened amounted to anything. And without knowing just what I meant to do, I went straight over to Mr. Holborn and began to tell him all I had seen and heard of Mr. Midgley and little Flora.

They all listened, though I hardly thought of anybody but Mr. Holborn then. I told him how Mr. Midgley had been brought to the house of the thieves the night before and how they had tried to make him join them. I told how he had said he wouldn't have anything more to do with them and how he had been trying to keep straight and do right to make up for being guilty once. And then I told what they did to him. And then—I don't know just why—I told them all about little

Flora and what Dr. Carter had said about her getting well, and, before I came to the end, I was crying just as I did at the police-station, and I had to stop.

But Mr. Holborn did a very queer thing. He stood and looked at me just as if he couldn't tell what to think, and then he suddenly commenced to walk up and down the room, and to blow his nose and wipe his glasses, looking first at one of us and then at another, but most at me and at Mr. Fleming.

"Well!" he said. "Well, well!" And then: "Well, well, well! I never saw the beat of this. I never saw the beat. I never—Fleming, what do you think of that? Did you ever—well, if this—I—I don't know what to say, sir. Fleming, what would *you* do?"

It was so queer that I had to watch him; and I guess I would have laughed if I hadn't felt so badly about Mr. Midgley and Flora. But before Mr. Fleming could answer, Mr. Holborn turned to me and just astonished me.

"Barney McGinnes," he said, "I like boys like you!"

I nearly did laugh right out then, I guess, that he should call me by that name that Prall had given me at the police-station and which I found out afterwards was still on the book there. He probably didn't remember that it wasn't right. But he went on very fast.

"I like such boys. Fleming, I like such boys. I like 'em. Do you know, I've a good mind to make a lawyer of you, Barney McGinnes? I never heard a better plea than yours here. I never heard—did you, Fleming? I've a notion to give Midgely here the chance. I've a notion to put him on parole and see him through. I believe I'll do it."

Parole means promise, and I knew he meant he was ready to help instead of make trouble for Mr. Midgley, and I was so glad I couldn't say anything. I guess I can't remember what anybody else said then either, for I looked at Flora and she was looking at me with her face all wet

with tears, just smiling so that anybody would have been as glad as you can tell to see her and would have known she was happy.

But Mr. Fleming got up and came across to me then, while he spoke to the policeman.

"Benson," he said, "I guess Holborn and Midgley had better talk this out alone. And this boy is tired out."

But he seemed to like everything I had said, for he was smiling and he put his arm right around me, just the way father does sometimes, and he motioned to the policeman to come. And he took me so, right out through the offices and down the elevator and through the store, while everybody turned to look and look, till I knew I got all red. And he kept on, just sort of carrying me along with him, till we got away downstairs into the shipping room and to Mr. Farley's desk.

Well, it wasn't a minute hardly, after we got there, before everybody in the big room was looking, too, and all the boys crowded up to

us, and it seemed as if everybody knew already what had happened. I could hear them talk, all around us.

"There's Whitehead!"

"There he is!"

"Look at him—with Mr. Fleming!"

And then, all at once, somebody began to holler, and in a second you could hardly think they could make such a noise—they were yelling and cheering and hollering for me. I could understand, of course, that they'd heard about the robbers and how they'd been caught, but it didn't seem as if they ought to be hollering for me. And I got all confused and couldn't think what to do, and so I could only stand and look first at them and then at Mr. Fleming, and try not to show how much I was scared. For it was just like being scared, I can tell you, and wasn't any fun, for they wouldn't stop for a long while till Mr. Fleming made them, so that he could talk to them.

I don't think I'll write about what he said,

because I guess I can't somehow, for it—well, you can't write that sort of things, you know, and it doesn't matter anyway. But at the end he astonished me very much by talking about something I'd forgotten all about, and that was the reward. He said he had offered the reward without hoping anyone would win it, because it looked hopeless, but he said he was proud and glad that "one of his boys" had won it.

That made me feel mighty proud, I guess, but I wasn't comfortable at all, even then, though I commenced to be very much excited, too, for I knew all that money—two hundred dollars—did belong to me, and I knew I was very, very glad because now father could get well without worrying about money to pay all our expenses. And then Mr. Fleming took hold of my hand and held it tight and looked so queer I hardly knew what was the matter, till he said something sort of soft and quiet about Flora.

"We'll have to take care of little Flora, too," he said then. That was just the way he said it,

and I knew then that he would see that she was taken care of right.

And then I went home. I saw Dib and Rick a minute, but I didn't have time to talk to them till next day. I went home as quick as I could, too, for I wanted to see my father. You always would rather tell your father and mother things then anybody else, of course, and I guess I couldn't hardly get home fast enough. I knew they wouldn't be worried, after everything had all come out right, and I wanted to tell them about the money. And when I did, you ought to have seen.

But it isn't necessary for me to tell all about that. Besides, I don't want to. It makes me get so I can't see to write when I think about how father looked; and mother cried, and I guess I did, too, but I was glad—gladder than I've ever been about anything in the world, so that's all I'm going to say about it.

Well, they did cure the little crutches-girl—Flora, I mean—and I know her now. She lives

not very far from us, and her father and brother do, too. I guess Midgy is a different boy from what he used to be and the fellows like him better. I never knew just all about what he did with the blind man—or rather Morse,—but I think if it was really anything he was sorry. He had nothing to do with the silver robbery, though, and it was the watchman, who disappeared, that helped the thieves get in. He was caught finally, too, and he confessed that he was the one who had made the first thefts and who had hidden the things in the box where Rick and I saw them. He intended to pass them out the window to Morse, who was begging outside. Mr. Midgley is a good man and the robbers never bother him any more, because three of them went to prison—Morse and Boyce and the watchman—for Benedict did what they called turning state's evidence—that means just telling on them, and they let him go free for doing it, though I don't think that is right at all He was just as much to blame as they were, it turned out, and

used his curiosity-store to sell stolen things from. But that's the way they have to do sometimes to get the other robbers.

And Dib is a driver now, and Mr. Fleming took Rick off the wagon and put him in the office for a while, till Rick's father got a good position in a big orchestra. So now Rick goes to school with me, since my father got well and is working again, too; and Mr. Fleming says when we get through he will give us another place in the store if we want it. And Mr. Benson got promoted for being the one to get the robbers, and I was glad about that, too, for it made things happen which maybe I can write about again sometime, if you like this story. I hope you do, because it's been a lot of work for a boy to write it all out.

THE END

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Publishers (ix, '05) New York

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Henry Holt and Company

Publishers (iv, '07) New York

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